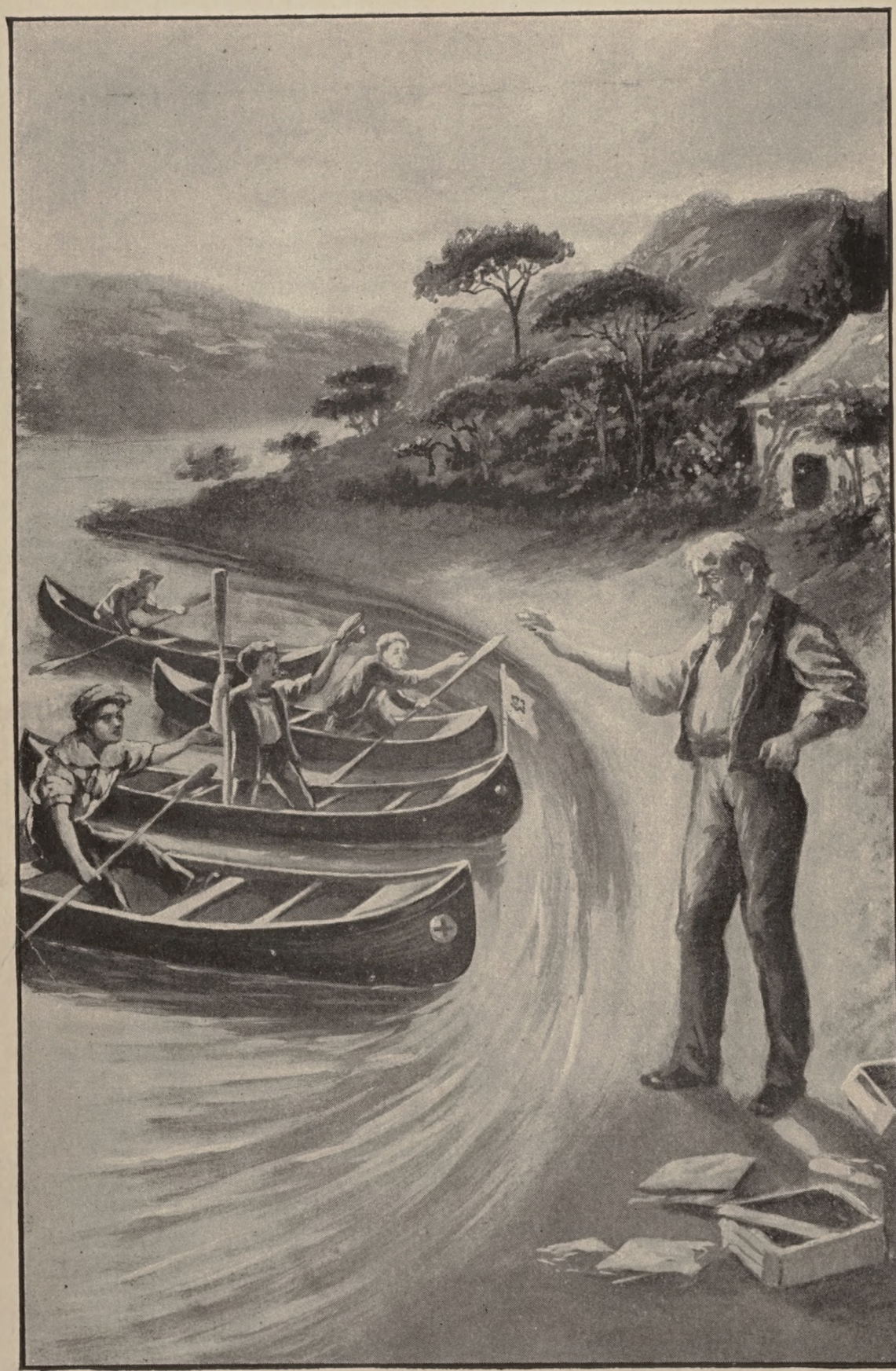
Class PZ7

Book .G796

Copyright No. Cuu

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

copy 2



THE JOLLY ROVERS WERE OFF AT LAST

Canoe Boys and Camp-Fires

CANOE BOYS AND CAMPFIRES

995
1246

Or,

Adventures on Winding Waters

BY

WILLIAM MURRAY GRAYDON
Author of "From Lake to Wilderness," "With Puritan and Pequod," "The Camp in the Snow," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY,
PUBLISHERS

Copy 2.

Two Copies Received
JUL 9 1907
Copyright Entry
Apr 25, 1907
CLASS a XXc. No.
175775
COPY A.

PZ7
.G796
Canc
Copy 2

BEST BOOKS FOR BOYS

The Young Builders of Swiftdale. By Allen Chapman. Cloth. Price, 75 cents.

Andy the Acrobat. By Peter T. Harkness. Cloth. Illustrated. Price, 75 cents.

Canoe Boys and Camp Fires. By William Murray Graydon. Cloth. Price, $1.00.

From Office Boy to Reporter. By Howard R. Garis. Cloth. Illustrated. Price, $1.00.

With Axe and Flintlock. By George Waldo Browne. Cloth. Illustrated. Price, $1.00.

The Quest of the Silver Swan. By W. Bert Foster. Cloth. Price, 75 cents.

The Crimson Banner. By William D. Moffat. Cloth. Price, $1.00.

Two Boys and a Fortune. By Matthew White, Jr. Cloth. Illustrated. Price, 75 cents.

An Oklahoma Boy. By Brant Collier. Cloth. Illustrated. Price, 75 cents.

Copyright, 1907, by
CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Introducing the Boys	9
II.	Planning the Trip	17
III.	The Cruise Begins	23
IV.	Adrift in the Darkness	32
V.	Disappearance of Nugget	40
VI.	The Lost Found	48
VII.	Batters and Joe	57
VIII.	How the Day Dawned	74
IX.	A Safe Shelter	82
X.	A Tramp Across Country	90
XI.	Searching for the Camp	99
XII.	Over the Cliff	107
XIII.	What Clay Shot	116
XIV.	Caught in the Whirlpool	125
XV.	Randy's Proposition	133
XVI.	A Shattered Delusion	142
XVII.	The Storm Breaks	149
XVIII.	At the Mercy of the Tempest	156
XIX.	Adrift on a Log	163
XX.	Mr. Dude Moxley	170
XXI.	A Mysterious Warning	178
XXII.	An Insolent Demand	185
XXIII.	A Daring Attempt	192

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIV.	An Unexpected Encounter	200
XXV.	The Siege Begins	207
XXVI.	Bug's Proposition	215
XXVII.	The Burning of the Mill	222
XXVIII.	A Good Deed	229
XXIX.	Randy Goes Sailing	236
XXX.	A Night Alarm	243
XXXI.	Stormy Weather	250
XXXII.	The Broken Dam	257
XXXIII.	An Underground Cruise	264
XXXIV.	Despair	270
XXXV.	Nugget Discovers a Light	275
XXXVI.	Home Again	280

CANOE BOYS AND CAMP-FIRES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE BOYS

"I SAY, Ned, this is beginning to grow wearisome," drawled Randy Moore as he tipped his chair against the wall, and crossed his feet on the low railing in front of him. "Clay promised to be here half an hour ago," he went on in an injured tone, "and if he doesn't come in a few minutes I'm going to have a spin on the river. It's aggravating to sit here and do nothing. I can count a dozen boats between the railroad bridge and Bushy Island."

"I wouldn't mind being out myself," said Ned Chapman, "but we have important business to transact to-night, Randy, and I think it would be wiser to let boating go for once. I have everything planned out in ship shape fashion, and it only wants the seal of approval from you and Clayton."

"Oh! you have, have you?" exclaimed Randy with a sudden show of interest. "That's good news, Ned. If Clay knew the momentous question was to be set-

tled at last, he would stir himself to get here, wherever he is. I'll give him ten minutes' grace."

"You'll give him as many minutes as he needs," rejoined Ned. "There must be some reason for his delay. It's new for him to be late. He's always the first to keep an engagement."

"We'll know when he comes," said Randy wisely. "Stop talking now. I want to count the boats. I never saw so many on the river before."

The two boys were sitting on a narrow balcony that projected from the second floor of a neat but unpretentious boathouse. The rear end of the edifice was built against the sloping base of the river bank.

From the park above a flight of steps, with a single hand rail, led down to the main entrance, which was on the second floor. The other end of the apartment opened on the balcony and faced the Susquehanna river.

From the lower floor, which held a number of boats and canoes, a plank walk sloped to the water's edge, ten or fifteen yards away.

Randy Moore was the fortunate owner of this snug little piece of property. The Harrisburg boys envied him his gun, his dog and his pony, but they would have fairly bowed down before him if by so doing they could have been put on the list of those favored ones who made free and daily use of the boathouse.

A "luck fellow" was the general verdict concerning Randy, and it was a true one. His father was

wealthy and never refused to gratify any reasonable desire of his only son. In consequence Randy was somewhat spoiled and self willed, but in other ways he was really a sensible lad.

The fact of his own superior position in life never occurred to him in relation to his companions. He gave himself no airs, and expected no homage or adulation.

His chief fault was a strong and uncurbed will, and he unfortunately had a quick temper. He was just sixteen years old, and was strong and hardy. He had dark eyes and hair, and a pleasing, attractive face.

Randy's most intimate friend, Ned Chapman, differed from him in every respect, and made an admirable foil for the other's impetuous temperament. Ned's father was a merchant in moderate circumstances, and he had just reason to be proud of his son's bringing up.

Ned was a steady, sensible lad, with very rigid ideas of right and wrong. Not that there was anything "priggish" about him. On the contrary, he was always the foremost in any undertaking that provided a little sport.

He was intensely fond of outdoor life, and was an acknowledged authority on everything relating to fishing, hunting, canoeing, and boating. But he did not allow recreation to interfere with his studies.

He and Randy were pupils at the academy, and both stood high in their classes.

Ned was a year older than Randy and half a head taller. He had brown hair, grayish brown eyes, and a deeply bronzed complexion, the result of living much in the open air and under the burning glow of the summer sun.

His face wore an expression of habitual good humor, and he had a rare command of his temper.

His grave displeasure was more dreaded than a passionate outburst would have been.

And now that two of the characters have been introduced to the reader, we must resume the thread of the story.

Randy's stipulated ten minutes had gone by, and five additional ones, when a shrill whistle was heard in the rear of the boathouse.

Both doors were open, and when the boys turned in their chairs and looked through they saw their tardy companion descending the steps that led from the top of the bank.

"It's Clay at last," exclaimed Randy.

"And some one with him," added Ned, as a second figure came into view.

At that instant the lad in the rear slipped, plunged head foremost down the remaining half dozen steps, knocking Clay to one side, and sprawled out in the doorway like a flattened frog.

Ned and Randy sprang up and hurried through the room.

"Why, it's Nugget," they exclaimed in great sur-

prise. "Where did you come from, old fellow? We're awfully glad to see you."

Nugget, otherwise known as Nugent Blundell, rose painfully to his feet and glared at the boys.

"Why don't you ask me if I'm hurt?" he demanded wrathfully. "I believe you fellows greased those steps on purpose."

"See here, Nugget, you don't believe anything of the sort," said Ned. "I'm sorry you fell, and I'm glad you're not hurt. Come, old fellow, shake hands."

Nugget's face assumed a mollified expression, and he accepted a hearty handclasp from Ned and Randy. Then he began to brush the dust from his neat gray suit and patent leather shoes.

Meanwhile Clayton Halsey had been fairly choking with stifled mirth in a dark corner of the room. He now came forward, trying hard to assume an expression of gravity.

He was a short, thickset lad, with a beaming countenance, red cheeks, blue eyes, and light curly hair. He was in the same class at the academy with Ned and Randy, and their constant companion on all occasions. His father was a prominent lawyer.

"What kept you so long?" asked Randy in a slightly aggrieved tone.

"That," replied Clay, pointing at Nugget. "He arrived in town this afternoon, and came to the house after supper. I knew you fellows would be glad to see him, so I brought him along. But what do you

think?" added Clay, winking slyly at Ned and Randy, "Nugget says he's going canoeing with us."

This piece of information produced a startling effect. Ned puckered his lips and gave a low whistle. Randy stared at Clay for an instant and then burst into a laugh.

Why this avowal on Nugget's part was received in such a peculiar way will be more clearly understood if a few words be said about that young gentleman himself.

Nugget was a New York boy, greatly addicted to cream colored clothes, white vests, patent leather shoes, high collars, gorgeous neckties, kid gloves, and canes.

He was about seventeen years old, and was tall and slender.

He had gray eyes, a sandy complexion and straight flaxen hair, which he wore banged over his forehead. A vacuous stare usually rested on his face, and he spoke in a slow, aggravating drawl.

Nugget had made the acquaintance of the boys during the previous summer, which he spent with his uncle in Harrisburg. He was a good enough fellow in some ways, but the several occasions on which he had been induced to go on fishing and boating excursions, had resulted in disaster and ridicule at poor Nugget's expense.

"What Nugget doesn't know about swell parties, and dancing, and operas isn't worth knowing," Clay Halsey had said at that time; "but when it comes to

matters of sport he doesn't know any more than a two days' old kitten."

The truth of this terse remark was readily appreciated by Clay's companions, and their present amazement and consternation on learning that Nugget wanted to go canoeing with them, can be easily conceived.

"Are you in dead earnest, Nugget?" asked Randy after a pause.

"Of course I am," was the aggressive reply. "I don't see anything funny about it though. I haven't been very well lately, and father let me stop school a month ahead of time, and come over here. I know he'll let me go canoeing if I write and ask him."

"But canoeing is vastly different from the kind of trips you made with us last summer," said Ned. "There is a good deal of hardship about it. You remember what a fuss you used to make over the merest trifles."

"You'll have to wear rough flannels and old clothes," added Randy. "You can't take kid gloves and patent leathers with you."

"And you'll have to sleep on the ground," put in Clay, "and eat coarse food. No chocolate cake and ice cream about canoeing."

"Oh, stop your chaffing," drawled Nugget sullenly. "I understand all that. I'm not as green as you think. If you fellows can stand it I can. Besides I've been practicing on the Harlem River this spring. I paddled a canoe from the Malta boathouse clear to

High Bridge and back. And I didn't raise a single blister."

"I'll bet you wore gloves," said Clay mockingly.

Nugget flushed with anger and confusion, but said nothing.

"It's time to stop that now, Clay," said Ned authoratively. "If Nugget wants to go along I don't see any serious objections. No doubt the trip will do him lots of good. But that question can be settled later. Give us some light, Randy, and I'll show you what I've got here."

CHAPTER II

PLANNING THE TRIP

It was not yet dark outside but Randy lit the handsome brass lamp that stood on the square oaken table, and the yellow glow shone into every corner of the room.

The apartment was furnished in the manner most dear to the hearts of boys. The polished floor was strewn with soft rugs, and the walls were hung with pictures and amateur photographs. In the corners and over the mantels were fencing foils and masks, fishing rods, baseball bats, creels, and several pairs of crossed canoe paddles which showed traces of hard usage.

When the boys had dragged chairs to the table and seated themselves, Ned drew a little bunch of papers from his pocket, and opened them with a flourish.

"When the question of a canoe trip came up a month ago," he began, "I told you it would be better fun to cruise on some small stream than on the Susquehanna. I knew what I was talking about, because I paddled the whole distance last year, from Lake Otsego to the bay.

"I suggested the Conodoguinet Creek as the best

cruising ground we could find around here, and promised to get all the information about it I could. I have kept my promise.

"Here is a map of the Cumberland Valley on a large scale, showing the entire course of the creek, and all its windings. You can examine that at your leisure. First I want to tell you what I have learned.

"Of course you knew that the Conodoguinet was about the most crooked stream in existence. We have evidence enough of that near home. You remember the big bend above Oyster's Dam — three miles around, and one field's length across. Well, there are bigger bends than that further up the valley.

"From the mouth of the creek to Carlile is just eighteen miles in a straight line. By the windings of the creek it is ninety miles. The distance was accurately measured and surveyed a number of years ago.

"Oakville is twenty miles beyond Carlile, and from there I propose that we should start. The upper part of the creek is not quite so crooked, but we are sure of a cruise of not less than one hundred and fifty miles. The creek is navigable all the way from Oakville, and there are not more than twelve or fifteen dams in the whole distance.

"The water is deep, and the current is swift in some places, sluggish in others. The channel winds through heavy timber lands and between high, rocky cliffs. The mountains are not far away. The fishing is splendid, and woodcock and snipe are plentiful."

Here Ned laid down the bundle of notes from which he had been reading.

"It will be a delightful trip," he added eagerly. "The Susquehanna can't compare with it. Instead of having to paddle our twenty or thirty miles a day in the broiling sun, and camp on gravel bars or grass flats, we can drift leisurely in the cool shade of the overhanging trees, stop when we please and as long as we please, and take our pick of a hundred beautiful camping places. In fact it will be a camping trip and canoe trip combined.

"And what's more we will be the first to navigate the creek. No canoe, or boat either, has ever made the winding journey from the head waters to the mouth. It is unexplored territory, except to the farmers and a few stray fishermen. You can take your choice now. Which is it to be? The Susquehanna or the Conodoguinet?"

Ned put the papers in his pocket and sat down.

"I say the creek, by all means, boys," exclaimed Randy.

"Same here!" echoed Clay.

"Aw, yes! that must be a beautiful stream, don't you know," drawled Nugget, in such a serio-comic tone that his companions burst out laughing.

When quiet was restored the map became the center of attraction, and Ned gladly pointed out places of interest and volunteered all sorts of information. As the hours went by the boys waxed enthusiastic over the proposed cruise. The details were mostly planned

out, and then a long discussion ensued over the choice of a name for the club.

Many titles were suggested and rejected, but finally Ned struck a happy combination, and the organization was unanimously christened the "Jolly Rovers."

At ten o'clock the boat house was locked up, and the boys climbed the bank, and went down through the city to their respective homes.

Now that the cruise was a settled fact the Jolly Rovers threw all their energies into needed preparations. In the evening, and between school hours they were always to be found at Randy's boat house.

Ned looked forward to the trip with the keen delight of one who had already tasted the joys of canoeing. Clay and Randy — who had not been permitted to accompany Ned down the Susquehanna the previous summer — had bright anticipations to be realized, while Nugget was just as eager as his companions. It had required much persuasion and many promises on Nugget's part to win the desired permission, and when the question was finally decided the new member of the Jolly Rovers was put on a severe course of training.

This embraced rowing, paddling a canoe, and swimming, and before the month of June was over Nugget was fairly proficient in all three. He purchased a second hand canoe which Ned picked out for him, and without the knowledge of his companions he wrote to his father in New York for a canoeing outfit.

The box duly arrived and was opened one evening

in the boathouse. The boys feasted their eyes on the array of treasures — fishing rods of spliced bamboo, a portable set of camp dishes that fitted into each other, a pair of brass lanterns, rubber blankets, and several other articles that were of no practical use on a canoe trip.

In the bottom of the box were four shirts of the softest flannel, two pairs of long black woolen stockings, and a canoeing suit of stout brown cloth — knickerbockers, blouse, and a yachting cap.

It was a fine outfit, and the boys good naturedly envied Nugget his luck.

The date of departure was fixed for the first week in July. When the academy closed on the 25th of June little or nothing remained to be done in the way of preparation — thanks to Ned's good generalship.

The four canoes lay in the lower section of the boathouse, radiant in new coats of paint. In the big closet on the upper floor were packed the varied assortment of dishware, lanterns, axes, bottles of oil, cement, cans of white lead, strips of oiled canvas, rolls of blankets, a new A tent, jointed poles for the same, and a bundle of iron stakes.

Such provision as could be taken along — oatmeal, rice, sugar, coffee and flour — had been ordered from a grocer, to be packed in waterproof jars.

Ned Chapman had been very properly chosen commodore of the club, and a couple of days before the start Randy's sister Mary presented the Jolly Rovers with a pennant of crimson and gold satin. The proper

place for it was at the bow of the commodore's canoe, so it was yielded to Ned.

With the exception of Randy's single barreled shotgun, no firearms were to be taken along. The boys demurred to this at first, but were finally won over by Ned's sensible arguments. Canoeists cruising through a peaceful country seldom need weapons of defense.

CHAPTER III

THE CRUISE BEGINS

THE first day of July fell on Thursday, and that afternoon the boxes containing the dishes, provisions and other traps, and the four canoes carefully wrapped in coffee sacking, were shipped to Oakville by freight.

On the following morning the Jolly Rovers departed by the seven o'clock train, and a ride of an hour and a half through the beautiful Cumberland Valley brought them to their destination. The canoes were found to be in good condition, and after a brief delay the services of a farmer and his team were engaged.

The inhabitants of the little village gazed with wonder and curiosity on the strange procession as it passed along the straggling street. The boxes and the gayly painted canoes completely filled the bed of the wagon. Nugget was perched on the seat beside the farmer, resplendent in his brown uniform. He held the pennant in his right hand, and waved it in the breeze from time to time.

The others marched with military precision behind the wagon. Randy bore his gun on his shoulder, and Ned and Clay carried paddles. All three wore knick-

erbockers and Norfolk jackets, and their faces were protected from the sun by canvas helmets with large visors.

For two miles and a half the road wound through a hilly, open country. Then it dipped into a wooded ravine, turned aside to follow a barely perceptable path through a heavy forest, and finally ended at a fording on the edge of the Conodoguinet.

"Here you are, boys," cried the farmer, as he pulled up his horses within a few feet of the water. "I reckon you couldn't have a better day for your start. The creek's in prime condition, too."

Nugget leaped down from the wagon and joined his companions. For a moment or two the boys quite forgot the work that had to be done.

With exclamations of delight they gazed on the narrow blue channel as it poured swiftly around a bend in the woods above and vanished from sight beneath the crooked arches of a mossy stone bridge a quarter of a mile below. The opposite shore was rocky and lined with pine trees, and over their tops could be seen against the horizon the jagged crest line of the Kittatinny Mountains.

"Come on now and get to work," said Ned finally. "My arms are itching to take hold of a paddle."

"So are mine," exclaimed Randy. "Let's be off as soon as possible."

With the farmer's aid the canoes were speedily taken from the wagon and placed on the grass close to the water's edge. They were built on somewhat

different lines, but all were serviceable and well adapted for speed. The framework and the canvas were both light, and the average weight was about eighty pounds, unloaded. The canoes were aptly named. The Water Sprite belonged to Randy. It was light and graceful, and owing to its flat bottom drew very little water.

Clay owned the Neptune, a broad decked craft, built somewhat on the order of the primitive Rob Roy. The Imp was narrow and rakish, with a low cockpit and a high bow and stern. Nugget regarded it with the affection that one feels for a favorite dog.

The Pioneer, in which Ned had cruised down the Susquehanna, was a heavy but neatly proportioned craft, and showed traces of wear and tear. They all contained spacious hatches fore and aft.

The boxes were unpacked, and under Ned's supervision the contents were judiciously distributed and stowed away in the different canoes. Then the seats and back rests were arranged in the cockpits, and the canoes were gently shoved into the water.

"Do you fellows expect to reach the river in them flimsy things?" exclaimed the farmer when he saw the four canoes swinging lightly with the current. "I reckon you'll repent it afore you get many miles from here."

"Not much danger," replied Ned laughingly. "A good canvas canoe will stand as much as a rowboat any time. There are no obstructions in the way, are there?"

"I dunno," replied the farmer. "It's a wild and lonsesome bit of country that this creek runs through, and I've heard tell of bad water an' whirlpools. The channel winds worse than any serpent. Why, it must be all of two hundred miles to the Big River."

"I hope you are right there," said Ned heartily, as he climbed out on his canoe and fixed the pennant securely on the bow. "Take your seats now," he added to the boys. "Everything's ready for the start."

They obeyed with a rush and a scramble, and Nugget very nearly got a ducking at the outset by thoughtlessly trying to stand up in the cockpit.

Good wishes and farewells were exchanged with the friendly farmer. Then four double paddles dipped the water and rose flashing with silvery drops, four canoes skimmed gracefully out on the swift blue surface of the creek. The Jolly Rovers were off at last.

When they were twenty or thirty yards down stream they turned and waved their paddles to the farmer, who was still standing in open-mouthed wonder beside the empty packing cases. Then a cross current, setting toward the right shore, whisked them out of sight of the spot.

Randy struck up the chorus of a popular boating song, and the others joined in with eager voices. Their jubilant spirits had to find a vent somewhere.

What a glorious thing it was to be drifting haphazard with the rippling current, free as the very air, and the birds that were singing sweetly in the bushes!

The narrow vista of the creek brought vividly to mind the pleasures that lay in wait along the twisted miles of its channel — the gamy bass lurking in the deep, shady holes, the snipe and woodcock feeding among the reeds, the tent and campfire with the savory odor of coffee and crisp bacon.

That less pleasant things than these were destined to fall to the lot of the Jolly Rovers ere they should paddle from the mouth of the creek into the broad Susquehanna, occurred to none, else a shadow had marred their bright anticipations at the start.

Side by side the four canoes darted under the middle arch of the old stone bridge, and then Ned took the lead, for it was not seemly that the pennant should be anywhere but in front while the club was on a cruise.

The current soon became sluggish, and the channel wound between thick woods, where the trees almost met overhead. The boys drifted along leisurely, stopping now and then to explore some tempting nook.

At one place, where the water was deep and a great rock jutted from the shore, they put their fishing rods together, and procured worms by pulling up great clods of grass. In half an hour they caught a beautiful string of sun-fish and chubs.

About the middle of the afternoon Ned went up to a farmhouse that was visible among the hills and came back with a pail of butter, a loaf of bread and two apple pies. The boys had already lunched on

crackers. So they concluded to keep these supplies for supper.

They paddled slowly on, crossing from shore to shore as something new took their attention. A sudden shadow, caused by the sun dipping beneath the hill top, reminded them that evening was at hand. The banks were closely scanned for a camping place, and an admirable one was soon found — a grove of big trees, through which filtered a tiny stream.

The boys landed and dragged the canoes partly out on the grassy slope.

"The tent is the first thing," said Ned, as he lifted the big roll of canvas from the cockpit of the Pioneer, where it had served as an admirable seat.

Randy unlashed the poles from the fore deck of his canoe, and joined them together.

This was a clever invention of Ned's. Each pole was in two parts, and could be put together like the joints of a fishing rod. The ferrule of the ridge pole, which had to endure the most pressure, was longer and stouter than the others. The poles were very light but strong, and the entire six pieces made no perceptible burden when lashed on a canoe.

Five minutes sufficed to raise the tent, and drive the iron stakes at the four corners. Then what articles would likely be needed were taken from the canoes and carried inside.

Ned hunted up two large stones, and placed them a foot apart. He laid four iron rods across them, and proceeded to build a fire underneath.

"That's the best cooking arrangement ever invented," he said. "We used it altogether on the Susquehanna last summer. If I prepare the supper you fellows must do the rest. Clay, you clean those fish. Bring me the salt, pepper and lard, Randy, and then peel some potatoes."

"Can I assist in any way?" drawled Nugget, as he emerged from behind the tent, where he had been slyly brushing off his clothes and shoes.

"Why, certainly," replied Clay. "Clean these fish for me, that's a good fellow."

Nugget rapidly opened and closed his mouth two or three times. "I — I— really — I'm afraid —" he stammered.

"Let him alone, Clay," cried Ned sharply. "Clean the fish yourself. Suppose you set the table, Nugget," he added kindly. "Arrange the plates and knives and forks on some grassy level place, I mean."

While his companions were performing the duties assigned to them, Ned went down to the stream and filled the coffee pot.

"This is spring water, as cold as ice," he exclaimed in surprise. "The source can't be far away."

The sun was now out of sight, and it grew darker and darker as the preparations for supper went on. Randy finished his own work, and helped Nugget arrange the dishes on an outspread square strip of canvas. He lit one of the lanterns and placed it in the center, and a few moments later Ned made the welcome announcement that supper was ready.

The coffee pot and the pans of fried fish and potatoes were gingerly carried over, and then the boys seated themselves at the four corners, crossing their legs under them, tailor fashion.

The ruddy flames mingled with the yellow glow of the lantern, dancing on the bright tinware, and casting the shadow of the tent far into the forest. The brook rippled softly through the ravine, and away up the creek the melancholy cry of a whippoorwill was heard.

"This is what I call glorious," said Ned, as he opened a can of condensed milk and passed it around. "Nothing equals a life in the open air, and no other sport has the same fascination."

"You're right there," stuttered Randy with his mouth full, "I'd like to live this way half the year round."

"It beats New York," said Nugget decidedly, as he raised a pint cup of coffee to his lips. The next instant he uttered a howl of anguish, and made a frantic grab at the pail of cold water.

"Was it hot?" asked Clay.

"Try it and see," retorted Nugget indignantly as he buried his nose in the pail.

For a little while the silence was broken only by the clatter of knives and forks. Then Ned said slowly, "It does a fellow lots of good to get away from the rush and noise of town life. We are safer here tonight that we would be at home. No peril can come near us. Our only neighbors are the simple, kind

hearted farmers —" he paused abruptly, and turned his head to one side.

A strange rustling noise was heard back in the forest. It grew more distinct with every second, and the boys looked at each other with fear and wonder. Then a gruff angry bark rang out on the night air, and the elder bushes across the glade swayed violently.

CHAPTER IV

ADRIFT IN THE DARKNESS

BEFORE the frightened boys could realize what was coming, a big yellow dog shot into view and rushed at them with a ferocious snarl. Under other circumstances the Jolly Rovers would have courageously faced the foe, but the attack was so sudden as to preclude the possibility of defense.

The supper party broke up in ignominious confusion. Ned bolted for the nearest tree and went up the trunk like a cat. Randy fled down the slope to the creek, and Clay sought shelter in the bushes on the far side of the rivulet. Nugget stared hopelessly about for an instant, and then, with a shrill cry of fear, he dived through the flaps of the tent.

The dog rushed across the table, tramping the dishes, and unfortunately upsetting the coffee pot. The hot liquid scalded the brute's paws, and snarling with rage and pain, he bolted into the tent after Nugget.

For a second or two there was a terrible outcry. Nugget's appeals for help mingled with the dog's angry barking. Then the tent shook violently and toppled to the ground.

At this interesting juncture the owner of the dog emerged from the bushes — a burly farmer with a very stern cast of features. He carried a lantern in one hand, and a short, thick club in the other.

The fallen tent first attracted his attention. It was wriggling about as though endowed with life, and from underneath came strange, muffled sounds.

The farmer lifted one end of the canvas, and gave it a vigorous jerk, thus liberating the dog, who began to prance about his master. A second pull revealed Nugget's legs thrashing wildly about on the grass. The dog immediately made a dart at them, but the farmer caught him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him back.

The boys had witnessed the whole affair from their hiding places, and now they dropped from the tree, and came timidly forward. At the same moment Randy crept out of the shadows and joined them.

The farmer caught sight of the boys and took a step toward them, still keeping a tight hold on his dog. "What do you mean by trespassin' here, you impudent young rascals?" he demanded savagely. "Get out of this as quick as you can, or I'll give you a taste of this."

He shook his club menacingly.

"I'm very sorry if we have offended you," said Ned quietly. "We did not suppose there would be any objection to our camping here. I don't think we have done any damage."

"Damage!" growled the farmer. "No, I reckon

not. You hain't had time for that yet. It was only last night I run two thieving rascals off my land. They hed a camp a little ways down the creek, an' fur two whole days they were livin' at my expense, stealing applies, an' eggs, an' chickens, an' whatever else they could lay their hands on. You people are all alike. You don't have no regards fur a farmer's rights."

"I'm very sorry you have such a bad opinion of us," said Ned. "I assure you we don't deserve it. If you will let us stay here to-night we will go quietly away in the morning."

"No," snarled the farmer. "You can't stay. I won't have it. Pack up at once and git out. And mind you don't stop anywhere within half a mile. I own the land that fur on both sides of the creek."

Just then a diversion was created by the dog. He tore loose from his master and rushed at Nugget, who had meanwhile crawled out from the fallen canvas, and was standing with open mouth and eyes, listening eagerly to the conversation.

"Here, Bowser," shouted the farmer sternly. "Come here, I say."

The brute reluctantly obeyed, while Nugget sought shelter in a young tree.

The angry man turned to the three boys — for Clay had by this time joined the others.

"Get out as quick as you can," he resumed. "I can't stand here all night."

For an instant no one replied. Ned was bent on

making another appeal, and was thinking how he could best word it. The chances were that a little persuasion would have induced the farmer to relent, and permit the boys to remain where they were until morning.

But Randy's unfortunate temper blazed up just then, and made a breach that was too wide to be healed.

"It's a confounded shame to turn us off at this time of night," he muttered angrily. "I wouldn't treat a dog that way. If this is a sample of country breeding I'm glad I don't —"

"Keep quiet, Randy," whispered Ned; "you're only making things worse."

The warning came too late.

"You audacious sauce box," cried the farmer. "I'll learn you manners. Take that — and that."

He seized Randy by the collar, and cuffed him soundly on the ears three or four times. Then he dropped him and turned to the others. "Now git out o' here, or I'll treat you-uns the same way," he snarled.

Randy was boiling with rage, but he dared not open his mouth again. Ned and Clay realized that further entreaty was now useless. Without a word they began to pack up, and were finally assisted by Randy and Nugget.

The farmer stood at one side, watching the operation keenly. In a brief space of time the tent and the unwashed dishes were tumbled into the hatches. Then

the boys pushed the canoes into the water, and took their seats.

The farmer came down to the shore to see them off.

"Mind what I told you," he said; "no stoppin' within a good half mile."

"Don't say a word," whispered Ned.

His companions wisely obeyed, and in utter silence they paddled out from the shore and headed down stream. Soon a curve in the channel hid from view the dying embers of the campfire and the twinkle of the farmer's lantern.

"Wouldn't I like to get square with that old curmudgeon!" exclaimed Randy; "my ears sting yet. For half a cent I'd go back and trample down his grain or break his fences."

"I wish you'd poison the dog," drawled Nugget. "The brute gave me a horrid fright. The falling of the tent was all that saved me from being chewed up."

"See here, Randy," said Ned in a grave tone. "If you had kept your temper down and your mouth shut, things would have turned out all right. A little reasoning would have pacified that farmer. I thought you had more sense. You heard what the man said, didn't you?

"Two men — tramps or fishermen, probably — had been camping on his land, and doing all the damage they could, and naturally enough he was inclined to take out his spite on us. I don't blame him much. Such a thing would rile any farmer. Most people have an idea that when they get in the country they

can do as they please, and for what these ignorant fools do the innocent ones have to suffer. We are finding that out ourselves just now."

"But the old brute might have seen that we didn't belong to that class of people," growled Randy, "and besides he didn't pay any attention to what you said."

"I had no chance to explain who we were," replied Ned. "You spoiled that for me by your impudence. I have no doubt the man was fair enough at heart. If we get in any more scrapes of that kind you must keep your temper down. I'm speaking for your own good, Randy. This isn't the first time your tongue has got you into trouble."

"It would be a good idea to keep his mouth tied shut except at meal times," suggested Clay laughingly.

"If you say that again I'll hit you with my paddle," threatened Randy. "I won't stand any nonsense from *you,* Clay Halsey."

"No quarreling, boys," said Ned. "That's enough now. We'll let the matter drop."

Clay subsided, and so did Randy. The latter stood a little in awe of Ned's rebukes, and whether he felt the justice of this one or not, he wisely made no more allusions to the farmer.

Indeed there were other things to think about now. The night was dark and gloomy, and it was difficult to perceive the outlines of the shores. The boys were tired and sleepy, but they feared to stop and hunt up a camping ground, lest the farmer should come down

and rout them out again. A light would betray them, but without it they could do nothing.

There seemed to be no current at all, and in the dead sluggish water half a mile meant a wearisome paddle.

"I'm awfully hungry," said Nugget in a plaintive tone. "I didn't have ten bites of supper."

"We're all hungry, for that matter," returned Ned, "and sleepy as well. We must find a camping place."

"You had better hurry then," observed Clay. "I believe it's going to rain. The air feels sultry, and there isn't a star in sight."

Almost as he spoke a sullen peal of thunder echoed among the hills, and an instant later a jagged flash of lightning blazed on the surface of the creek.

The boys huddled a little closer together and nervously discussed the situation. A storm was bad enough when they had a snug tent to shelter them, but in their present plight, adrift on the water in pitch darkness, there was no telling what disaster might happen.

"I wish I was home," said Nugget. "I'm awfully afraid of thunder and lightning."

No one laughed at this candid confession. The occasion was too serious for mirth.

"I hardly know what would be best to do," began Ned. "If there is going to be much lightning we will be safer on the water than among the trees on shore. But here comes a gale, if I'm not mistaken. That will make things lively for us."

Ned's prediction was correct. The trees on shore suddenly began to rustle and creak. The water was lashed into short, choppy waves, which turned to white capped billows as the wind waxed stronger. It was evident that this part of the creek occupied an exposed position.

"Keep your canoes trim," shouted Ned. "The wind will drop as soon as the rain comes."

It is doubtful if his companions heard the warning. The force of the tempest had already driven the canoes apart.

For two or three minutes Ned was tossed about at will, momentarily expecting his frail craft to upset. He could see no trace of his companions in the darkness, and when he shouted the roar of the gale almost drowned his voice.

Suddenly he felt a severe shock, and then the canoe stood still. As he partially rose, and peered to right and left, a dim object glided swiftly by him. A second later it disappeared with startling abruptness, and a frantic cry for help rang out hoarsely above the fury of the storm.

CHAPTER V

DISAPPEARANCE OF NUGGET

NED knew that the dim object must have been a canoe, but its sudden effacement, and the loud cry for help, were mysteries too deep for immediate comprehension. He shouted with all the power of his voice full half a dozen times, but no answer came back.

Then a happy thought flashed into his mind. When he had satisfied himself by shaking it violently that the canoe was firmly lodged on some object — probably a rock — he leaned forward and took his lantern from the hatch. By holding it low in the cockpit he had no difficulty in lighting the wick.

The lantern was a bullseye, and as soon as Ned turned the flashing glare on the surrounding darkness the mystery was solved. The Pioneer was lodged in mid channel on a timber dam. The bow projected a foot or two over the edge, but could go no further owing to lack of water. None was running over at all at this point, and the slimy timbers protruded six or eight inches above the level of the creek.

While Ned was making these investigations the wind ceased, and he heard close at hand a steady roaring noise, like the furious patter of rain on a tin roof.

But it was not rain that produced the noise, though big drops were even then beginning to fall.

A twist of the lantern to the left sent a luminous bar of light along the breast of the dam, and revealed a jagged break, fully six feet wide, through which the freed water poured with the speed of a millrace. The chasm was barely a dozen feet from where the Pioneer had lodged, and Ned's first thought was one of gratitude for his own escape. Then he remembered with a thrill of horror what had happened a moment or two before. Which of his companions had been carried through the break, and where was the unfortunate lad now?

As Ned stood with the lantern turned on the fatal spot, a shout rang out behind him, and the next instant the Water Sprite grounded on the edge of the dam beside the Pioneer.

"I'm glad you lit that lantern, Ned," exclaimed Randy breathlessly. "I came pretty near paddling back up the creek. But where are the other fellows?"

Ned pointed to the broken dam and huskily related what had occurred.

Randy was horror stricken.

"I heard that cry for help, too," he said, "but I had no idea what it meant. Are you sure one of the boys went through?"

"I saw the canoe plainly," replied Ned. "There was just one cry for help, and after that I could get no answer when I shouted."

"We'll hope for the best," said Randy stoutly.

"Perhaps he made the plunge all right, and is half a mile down the creek by this time. Great Cæsar! I hope both the boys didn't go through. No, there's a light now on the left shore. It's either Nugget or Clay with a lantern."

"Paddle over and bring him back with you," directed Ned. "If he tries to come himself he'll go through the break. Be sure to keep away above the dam though, and when you return don't let my lantern mislead you, because I intend to wade along the breastwork and have a look at that hole. If you head for a dozen feet this side of the light you'll likely land where you are now."

Randy promised obedience, and departed in haste. Ned watched him anxiously until he was out of sight. Then he sounded the water with his paddle, and finding it quite shallow he climbed carefully out of the canoe.

Holding the lantern in one hand, and clutching the projecting edge of the dam with the other, he moved along foot by foot, submerged to his waist. It was well that he had this support, for his feet were on the sloping, mud incrusted planks.

When the broken place was three or four feet away the water began to deepen. Ned stopped and flashed the light on the lower side of the dam. He saw little there to comfort him.

The fall was about six feet, and at the bottom of the long, glassy sheet of water which plunged through the break at a frightful speed, great foam crested waves

began, and rolled and tumbled in awful confusion as far as the gleam of the bullseye could reach. That a canoe could go through such a place without capsizing seemed an utter impossibility.

There was no sign of one, however, in the quiet eddies on either side of the raging channel, and with this dismal scrap of comfort Ned retraced his perilous journey to the canoe. He had hardly gained it, and climbed in, when Randy and his companion paddled their craft alongside. That companion was Clay. Nugget, then, was the missing Jolly Rover.

"Discover anything?" demanded Randy.

"No. It looks bad for poor Nugget, boys. If the canoe had gone through all right he would have paddled to shore, and been making a big outcry by this time."

"He can't be drowned. I won't believe it," cried Randy. "See here, Ned, isn't it likely that Nugget caught hold of the canoe when it upset, and clung to it? The roar of the water would account for your not hearing his cries."

"It may be," said Ned reflectively, as he dashed a tear from his eye. "If that's the case we will soon overtake him — provided he doesn't let go his hold. Let's have a look at the right hand corner of the dam."

"Yes, that will be the most likely place," added Clay. "The race is on the other side. I nearly blundered into it."

The boys paddled to shore, following the line of the dam, and a brief search with the lantern revealed

an easy path by which the canoes could be carried around.

There was no sign of a house, and Clay reported none on the opposite side, so the mill was probably some distance below.

Under the excitement of the moment the boys scarcely felt the weight of the heavily laden canoes. They carried them, one at a time, up a sloping bank, and then down through the bushes to the water.

When they embarked, and paddled out through the quiet shallows to the swift channel in midstream, the wind had nearly subsided and the rain was falling in a desultory fashion which promised only a brief continuance. In fact stars were visible here and there through rifts in the black clouds. The storm seemed to have gone off in another direction.

A short distance below the dam the water became very sluggish, and the boys knew that if Nugget was ahead of them they must speedily overtake him. So they paddled hard, forgetful of weariness and hunger, and at frequent intervals shouted loudly and called their companion by name.

The lanterns were exposed to view so that Nugget could not fail to see the light if he was anywhere near.

For half an hour the three heartsick lads paddled on steadily, and in that time hardly a word was exchanged. They were in no mood for conversation.

Finally the track of yellow light which shone ahead from Ned's bullseye revealed a bit of an island in

midchannel — a strip of gravel and reeds, with a few stunted bushes growing in the center.

Ned drove the Pioneer on the upper point and stepped out. His companions did the same, and Randy asked wearily: "What are you going to do here?"

"Wait for daylight," said Ned. "It's the only thing we *can* do. We are a good mile and a half below the dam, and if the canoe was drifting in that sluggish water, we passed it long ago. It has probably lodged on some bar, or along the shore, and will be found in the morning."

"Then you think that Nugget is — is drowned?" asked Clay huskily.

Ned stooped and pulled the canoe up on the bar.

"I don't know," he said in a broken voice. "If Nugget was alive he would surely have heard our shouts or seen the lights. We won't know anything positively until morning. It could do no good to paddle up the creek again in the darkness, so we had better wait here as patiently as we can."

No objection was made to this plan, and the boys crawled in among the bushes and sat down with Clay's lantern between them. The passing storm had not cooled the sultry atmosphere, and no fire or blankets were needed.

All seemed stupefied by the terrible misfortune that had happened, though as yet they hardly realized its full significance. They purposely refrained from talking about it, though each knew in his own heart how

wildly improbable was the hope that Nugget was still alive.

The hours of that dark, dismal night wore slowly on. There was plenty to eat in the canoes, but no one was hungry now. A lantern was kept burning at the upper point of the island, and from time to time one of the boys went down to the shore and shouted till the echo rang far among the hills. They must have known that it was but a hollow mockery, and yet there was a scrap of consolation even in pretending that hope was not entirely gone.

Ned insisted that his companions should lie down and sleep. This seemed impossible at first, but after a while drowsiness and fatigue asserted their sway. Randy went down to the canoes and returned with three blankets. He and Clay wrapped themselves up, and chose a soft spot among the bushes. In five minutes they were sleeping soundly.

Ned remained where he was for a long while, keeping solitary vigil over his companions. Then he began to pace up and down the island, and finally he pulled the blanket about his shoulders and sat down on the upper end of the bar with his back against the side of the canoe.

It was his intention to remain awake, but unconsciously his eyelids drooped, and after a feeble struggle or two he sank into a deep slumber.

He knew nothing more until he woke in the gray dawn of the morning. For a few seconds his surroundings seemed familiar. Then the bitter truth

flashed into his mind, and he rose with an aching heart. He was stiff and shivering, and the cool breeze that blew down the creek, scattering the light, vapory mists over the surface of the water, made him keenly conscious of the pangs of hunger.

He went up in the bushes and wakened Clay and Randy. They followed him stiffly down to the shore, and after dipping their feet in the cool, rippling water, all sat down on the grass and ate a few crackers. Ned offered to build a fire and make some hot coffee, but the others protested that they did not care for it.

The sun was just peeping above the horizon when the boys pushed their canoes into the water and embarked on the dreaded journey up the creek. Both shores were thickly timbered, and to make the search more thorough Ned kept close to the right bank, while Clay and Randy followed the left.

They paddled with leisurely strokes, maintaining a sharp watch on every patch of reeds and every little inlet. In the first mile there was nothing to reward the searchers — not the slightest trace of the missing canoe or its occupant.

Then the channel made a sharp curve, and when they paddled around it they saw, nearly half a mile above, a gray, weather worn mill, standing in a grove of willows on the right hand shore. The dam was visible a hundred yards or so beyond, and the sunlight was dancing on the foaming torrent that poured through the break.

CHAPTER VI

THE LOST FOUND

WITHOUT lessening their vigilance the boys paddled on against the increasing current. When the mill was very near Ned signaled the others to join him.

They quickly crossed to the right shore, and the three canoes were run into a quiet little nook close to the swirling mouth of the race. The mill was twenty yards above, and a little to the right of it a cozy frame house, overgrown with trailing vines, peeped above the willow trees.

"I thought we had better stop here on account of the swift water," said Ned. "We will go up to the dam on foot, and take a look at the deep holes under the breastwork."

Before Clay or Randy could reply a man came briskly through the trees — the miller beyond a doubt, for his clothes and hat were white with flour. He greeted the boys with a smile and a cherry nod.

"I guess you're the chaps I was just starting out to find," he said. "T'other young chap was getting anxious about you, and not much wonder. He feared you were all drowned, and I guess you thought the

same about him. It was lucky I run across him this morning. You see I went down to the creek at daybreak to look for a stray cow, and when —"

"Did you find a boy called Nugget?" interrupted Ned in great excitement.

"And a green and white canoe called the Imp?" shouted Randy, as he tossed his cap into the air.

"That's about the way of it," responded the miller. "But come up to the house and see for yourselves. You look as if you were nearly starved."

The boys needed no second invitation. With eager steps and light hearts they followed their guide through the trees, and across the little garden to the rear of the house.

The miller threw open the door, and they rushed in with cries of delight. There sat Nugget at the kitchen table, making a fierce onslaught on ham and fried potatoes. He was rigged out in a suit of clothes three times too big for him, and his brown uniform was drying before the fire.

The boys were so glad to see him that they first laughed and then cried almost, while the miller and his wife looked on in wonder.

Nugget took things very coolly.

"Where did you fellows spend the night?" he asked, after the first greetings were over.

"Where did *you* spend it?" exclaimed Ned. "You gave us a pretty scare, Nugget. We never expected to see you again."

"Let him spin his yarn while you're eating break-

fast," interrupted the miller. "Lizzie, set three more plates out."

A moment later the boys were attacking the food with keen appetites, and as Nugget was now through, he proceeded to relate his adventures.

"When the wind came up and separated us," he began, "I got pretty badly scared. I was afraid it would rain hard, so I took out my canvass apron and buttoned it over the cockpit, close up to my waist."

"Good for you!" said Ned. "If I'm not mistaken that was what saved you."

"Perhaps it was," resumed Nugget. "I paddled on for a little while, trying to find you fellows. All at once I heard an awful roar, and the canoe made a jump as though it was going to stand on end. I gave one yell, and the next thing I knew big waves were jumping all around me."

He paused to shiver at the recollection.

"And what then?" asked Randy breathlessly.

"Then I was more scared than ever," continued Nugget in a reluctant voice. "So I crawled under the apron and snuggled up in the cockpit. There was plenty of room, and the cushion made a nice soft pillow, and — and — I fell asleep."

"Fell asleep!" ejaculated Ned in amazement. "You don't mean it?"

"Why, yes," said Nugget. "I was awfully tired, you know, and I couldn't keep my eyes open. The next thing I remember is that man there helping me

out. It was daylight, and the canoe was in a little channel with thick bushes all around."

The boys were not slow to appreciate the ludicrous side of Nugget's adventure, and they laughed long and heartily.

Then the miller told how he found the canoe in a stretch of back water that ran a few yards in from the creek, and how surprised he was when he pulled the apron off the cockpit and saw Nugget fast asleep.

"I noticed that inlet," said Ned, "but I didn't see anything of the canoe."

"Because I pulled it out in the bushes," replied the miller. "The current has a natural drift toward the place, and clogs it up with rubbish sometimes. The lad had a narrow squeeze of it when he went through that hole in the dam. I intend to fix it as soon as the water goes down a little."

"I don't want to go through any more such places," said Nugget. "I suppose that apron was what kept the water out. I shipped a little bit, though I didn't know it until this morning, when I found my clothes all wet. My extra suit is in your canoe, Randy. I had dry shirts, though. Say, wouldn't I look nice marching down Fifth Avenue in this rig?"

The boys laughed at the idea, and then drew their chairs away from the table, and chatted for half an hour with the miller, relating all that had happened on the previous night, and telling him of their proposed trip to the Susquehanna. He, in turn, gave

them much interesting information about the creek, where to camp and where to fish.

Ten o'clock came before any one realized it, and the boys prepared to depart, in spite of their host's earnest invitation to stay for a day or two. Nugget changed his clothes, and started for the inlet with the miller, while the others embarked in their canoes, after thanking the miller's wife for her hospitality.

The inlet was half a mile down the creek. The boys reached there first, and were joined by the others two or three minutes later.

Fortunately Nugget's paddle was not lost. He had found it stranded along the shore while on his way to the mill that morning.

The boys lingered a moment to shake hands with their kind hearted friend, and thank him for his services.

"That's all right," said the miller, "only too glad to oblige you. Be sure and stop when you pass here again. My name is John Kling."

"We'll spend a week with you next time," returned Ned, as he grasped his paddle.

"Please have the dam mended before then," drawled Nugget.

The miller laughed and waved his hand, and amid a chorus of "good-byes" the Jolly Rovers paddled away from shore. The shadow of misfortune was forgotten, and the future was full of bright anticipations, as before.

The birds sang among the leaves, the fish leaped

in the ripples, and the sunlight danced on the blue water.

The little island, where the boys had spent such a wretched night, was soon far behind, and they entered upon a more beautiful stretch of country than they had yet seen. The water was very sluggish, and on each side were great hills densely covered with pine and spruce trees.

The temptations to stop were so frequent that by mid-afternoon the boys were scarcely five miles from the mill — that is to say by water. It was probably less than half that distance in a straight line.

"I'm really hungry again in spite of that big breakfast," said Clay. "Can't we stop and have lunch?"

"I second that," cried Randy.

The others were of the same mind, and as a very pretty spot happened to come within view about that time, they paddled across to it and landed.

Closer inspection only added to the charms of the place.

It lay on the right shore, at the mouth of a deep, dark ravine. A beach of smooth pebbles sloped back to a grassy bank three or four feet high, and on the plateau above were a dozen or more massive girthed pine trees, whose fragrant needles carpeted the ground. A fair sized brook gurgled through the center over a bed of mossy stones, and emptied into the creek.

"We might travel a good many miles and not find such a place as this," said Ned. "Suppose we stay

here for a day or two. To-morrow is Sunday and we would have to stop then anyhow."

This suggestion was adopted without a dissenting word and the boys became enthusiastic over the prospect. Randy wanted to begin fishing at once, while Nugget proposed an exploration of the ravine. A few sensible words from Ned cooled their ardor, and they started in with a will to arrange the camp.

The tent was staked in a carefully selected spot, and then the canoes were unloaded and placed on the beach in a row, bottom up, so what little water was in them might drain out.

While Nugget and Clay carried the provisions and other articles up to the tent, Ned and Randy washed the dirty dishes of the night before. Then the blankets were put to air on a stout line stretched between two trees, and a great heap of firewood was collected.

"That's all for the present," said Ned, as he finished tying the pennant to the front tent pole. "You can do a little fishing now if you want to. Don't venture far away from the camp, because I'm going up the ravine to look for a farmhouse."

Randy declared that he was tired and would rather stay by the tent, so Nugget and Clay prepared their rods and went down the creek a short distance to a jutting point of rock. With a diminutive hook they caught a couple of minnows, which they used for bait.

For a long time their patience was unrewarded, but finally Nugget had a strike, and after a severe strug-

gle he landed a fine bass that could not have weighed less than a pound. Clay caught a smaller one, and after that the fish stopped biting.

At sundown they put up their rods and went back to camp. Ned had just returned, bringing with him a pair of dressed chickens and a pail of milk.

"These will make us a good dinner to-morrow," he said. "I had a hard time finding the farmhouse. It was more than a mile away, and the path led through the woods for nearly the whole distance. I suppose you are pretty hungry by this time. If you all pitch in and help we'll soon have supper."

In a short time the fire was blazing merrily. Ned was as good as his word, and the *menu* he set before the boys that night was a tempting one. It included fried bass, ham and eggs, and baked potatoes, with milk and pie for desert.

As the night was warm all indulged in a delicious swim after the supper dishes were cleared up. At nine o'clock they turned in and tied the tent flaps shut. Even this precaution was felt to be unnecessary, since the very loneliness of the place was a protection against harm.

Randy, who occupied the proud position of log keeper to the Jolly Rovers, sat up for a while to jot down the events of the cruise in a blank book. He finally extinguished the lantern with a sigh of satisfaction, and was soon sleeping beside his companions.

Sunday dawned bright and clear, but the boys did

not get up until nine o'clock. The pine needles made a couch that was hard to leave. The day was observed in a spirit of proper regard. Its monotony was somewhat alleviated by the dinner of fried chicken, but all were glad when night came.

HER REVOLVING TAIL LASHED HIM SMARTLY OVER THE FACE

Canoe Boys and Camp-Fires

CHAPTER VII

BATTERS AND JOE

NED was up with the sun on Monday morning. He pulled the tent flaps wide open, so that the cool air would stream in and awaken his companions. Then he threw a towel over his shoulder and marched down to the mouth of the brook to wash his face and hands.

But this laudable purpose was quite driven from his mind by the discovery which greeted his eyes when he arrived there. On the spit of jutting sand which had formed at the junction of the creek and the brook was the deep imprint of a boat's keel, and close by were half a dozen large footsteps.

They looked quite fresh, and had evidently been made by two persons. Some were long and pointed; others square toed, and shod with nails or pegs.

As Ned gazed on these evidences of a nocturnal visit, he felt pretty much as did Robinson Crusoe when he discovered the print of naked feet on his island.

It was impossible to tell where these strangers had been, since the gravel beach and the grassy soil beyond it left no traces.

Ned washed his face and hands and returned to the

tent with a troubled mind. The boys were awake by this time, and he told them of his discovery.

"Hullo! that explains something," exclaimed Clay. "I got awake last night, and struck a match to find the pail of water that was standing outside the tent. I thought I heard a noise down by the creek, but I was too sleepy to bother about it, and went back to bed."

"Then you must have scared these fellows off," said Ned. "That accounts for nothing being stolen. Everything of value was in the tent, however, and I don't suppose they cared to meddle with the canoes."

"Do you think these are the same men that the farmer chased off his land?" asked Randy.

"Very likely," replied Ned. "I'm sorry now that I didn't inquire more about them. The best thing we can do is to break camp and put about ten miles between us and this place."

"That would be cowardly," exclaimed Randy. "We have no reason to be afraid of these fellows. They'll get a warm reception if they meddle around camp again. Let's stay here for one day anyhow. We won't find many prettier places, and besides, I'm anxious to do some hunting and fishing."

Clay seemed disposed to side with Randy, while Nugget favored both sides of the question. He wanted to go, and he was just as anxious to catch some more bass down at the point of rocks.

Ned hesitated for a moment. He knew that it would be the more prudent plan to break camp at

once, but the same time he was not inclined to insist upon it, and thus incur the ill will of his companions.

"I see that the majority is against me," he said good naturedly. "But if we get in any kind of a scrape you fellows will shoulder the blame, that's all."

The boys appeared to be satisfied with this arrangement. They trooped off to the brook to wash, while Ned turned aside to make the fire.

After breakfast Randy shouldered his gun and started down the creek in search of snipe or woodcock. Clay and Nugget caught a pailful of minnows and departed for the point of rocks, for this was the time of day when the bass would probably bite best.

Ned did not accompany them. He had the true appreciation of outdoor life, and was never happier than when doing odd bits of work around the camp. He occupied himself in this way for an hour or two — arranging the interior of the tent, hanging the blankets out to air, stacking the wood neatly by the fireplace, and scrubbing the frying pans and the outside of the coffee pot with sand and gravel.

He was scooping out a little fish pond at the mouth of the brook when Randy returned.

"What luck?" he asked, looking up from his work.

"Not a thing," answered Randy in a disappointed tone. "The snipe are all on the other side of the creek. I'm going after them now in my canoe. I tramped along the shore for at least a mile, Ned, and I didn't see a trace of anybody, either on this side or

on the other. Our midnight visitors must have cleared out for good."

"I hope they have," said Ned. "What luck are the boys having?"

"Four bass, and one of them is a big fellow. Help me up with my canoe now, will you?"

Ned rendered the desired assistance.

"Don't stay too long," he told Randy.

"I'll be back inside of an hour," was the reply, as the other paddled swiftly down the creek.

Ned finished the fish pond to his satisfaction, and feeling a little tired, he climbed up the slope and threw himself down in a clump of high grass behind the tent. He was gazing dreamily up the creek with his head resting on his outstretched arms, when a boat containing two persons came suddenly into view around the bend.

Ned crept a little deeper into the grass, where he could see without being seen. The boat was now out of sight behind the trees, but when it reappeared a moment later, directly opposite the camp, a single glance satisfied Ned that it was not the same craft which had landed at the mouth of the brook during the previous night.

This was a rude affair known as a "flat." It was long and narrow, with square ends and sides, and from its cranky motion evidently had no keel.

The occupants were young fellows of twenty or thereabouts. They were roughly dressed, and their general appearance was by no means favorable. They

stopped paddling in amazement when they caught sight of the camp, and after a brief conversation, which Ned did not catch, they ran their craft on shore a few yards below the mouth of the brook.

Ned shifted his position, and watched their movements curiously. The strangers evidently intended to pitch a camp of their own, for they made frequent trips up the slope, carrying blankets and tin pails, and various other articles. Then they chopped down a number of fine shoots, and constructed, in a brief space of time, a snug lean-to between two big trees.

Having placed their things in this — casting suspicious glances all the while at the tent — they went back to the boat, climbed in, and paddled swiftly down the creek.

Ned rose to his feet, and looked after them in amazement. As the boat vanished around the sharp curve that the creek made immediately below the camp, he noticed for the first time a bait box trailing on behind.

"I understand it now," he muttered. "Those fellows are out for a fishing trip, and they're going down to the rocks to set their lines. I hope they won't get into a row with Clay and Nugget."

The possibility of such a thing made Ned uneasy. He stood in perplexity for a moment or two, and had just made up his mind to go down and look after the boys, when the sound of loud, angry voices reached his hearing.

He hesitated no longer, but leaped down the slope

and ran at full speed along the beach. Bursting through a covert of reeds and tall bushes, he emerged within a few yards of the rocks.

On the outermost bowlder, close to the swirling current, were Nugget, Clay, and the two strangers. The flat was drawn out on shore.

As Ned put foot on the nearest rock the taller of the strange lads struck Nugget violently on the arm with a paddle. Clay immediately hit the cowardly fellow in the breast, and in the struggle that followed the latter lost his balance and rolled backward into the swift current. His companion pounced on Clay, and they came down together on the rock, while Nugget stood by, holding his injured arm and shouting for help.

Ned took in the situation at a glance. He saw that the lad in the water was a poor swimmer, and could make no headway against the current. Without stopping to count the cost he threw off his coat, and ran to the edge of the bowlder.

"Bring the boat quick!" he shouted to Clay and his assailant, who had fallen apart and were glaring wrathfully at each other.

Then Ned put his arms together and dived head first into the foaming water. He came to the surface half a dozen yards below, and struck out vigorously for the struggling lad, who was by this time on the point of exhaustion.

Ned was an admirable swimmer, and absolutely fearless in the water.

"Keep cool, and don't struggle," he shouted, as he reached the fellow and put on hand on his collar.

The other had sense enough to obey, and both floated down stream together.

It was out of the question for Ned to reach the shore immediately with his heavy burden, and as Clay and the other lad were slow about launching the boat, the affair might have ended seriously. But just at that time Randy came paddling up the creek in his canoe, and spied the drifting figures.

He was soon alongside, and as the stern of the Water Sprite swung toward them, Ned and his companion each threw an arm over it.

Then Randy paddled for the shore, and landed about sixty feet below the rocks.

Clay and the other stranger reached the spot in the boat just as Ned and the lad he had so nobly rescued, waded out on the beach. The latter shook the water from his clothes and hesitatingly approached Ned.

"I dunno' how to thank you for what you did," he said sheepishly. "I'm mighty sorry I hit that chap. Me and Joe were downright mad because you'uns were fishing thar in our place. You see we come here from the mountains every now and then, and ketch a lot of bass, and sell 'em back at Newville. I reckon it ain't our place anyhow, an' you'uns can fish thar as much as you please. My name is Jim Batters — Batters they allus calls me — and that's my brother Joe there."

"I'm glad to know you, Batters," said Ned, holding

out his hand. "You are welcome to your fishing ground. We are going away to-morrow anyhow. As for the quarrel — we'll just let that drop. You had better go up to camp now and dry your clothes."

Batters was not satisfied, however, until he had apologized all around, and made Joe do the same. Nugget had arrived by this time, and he declared that his arm no longer pained him.

Then the whole party went up the creek, some on water and some on land. The two mountaineers were tall, lanky youths with expressionless faces, surrounded by shocks of yellow hair.

They wore homespun clothes and high boots. They were speedily on intimate terms with Jolly Rovers, and gladly accepted Ned's invitation to dinner. They asked many curious questions, and lost themselves in admiration over the canoes.

Ned told them about the nocturnal visitors of the previous night, and inquired if they had seen anything of the men. Both stoutly replied in the negative, but a swift, covert glance that passed between them did not escape Ned's attention.

During the remainder of the day he remembered it more than once. When dinner was over they all went down to the rocks, and Batters and Joe proudly displayed their skill at fishing. In two hours they caught fifteen large bass. For bait they used crabs and lizards, which they had brought from the mountains.

In the evening Randy entertained the country lads with a mouth organ performance, and at ten o'clock

the visitors went to their camp on the other side of the brook.

It had been a long day, and the Jolly Rovers were glad to get to bed. They were too drowsy to think about the possibility of another visit from the mysterious boat, and in a very few minutes all were sound asleep.

About midnight — as nearly as he could judge afterward — Ned sat up with a start, firmly convinced that some danger was at hand. As he listened with a wildly throbbing heart, soft footsteps cracked on the pine needles outside, and then the tent flap was torn open, revealing against the lingering embers of the campfire the semblance of a human form.

"Hi! you chaps in thar!" whispered a gruff and unfamiliar voice. "Get awake, quick!"

The words had a soothing affect on Ned's fears, and satisfied him that the visitor — whoever he was — had come in the guise of friendship. He drew a match from his pocket and rubbed it on his trousers. It ignited, and revealed the pale face of Batters, framed between the tent and flap.

"Great Cæsar! Is it you?" exclaimed Ned. "What's wrong?"

"Hush! not so loud," whispered Batters. "Put that light out, quick!"

Ned obeyed in haste.

"Now rouse the other chaps, and do it quietly, so they don't make no noise."

This was a pretty stiff order, and Ned had some

fears for the result. Happily all went well, and in two or three minutes an audience of four trembling and well nigh panic stricken lads was sitting in the darkness, listening to Batter's ominous tale.

"Joe waked me up a little while ago," he began, "an' said there was a strange boat, an' two men in it, down by the mouth of the run. I tole Joe ter stay an' watch our stuff. Then I sneaked along the shore an' seen the fellows sittin' on the beach along side the canoes.

"I didn't dare go close enough to hear what they was sayin', so I come right up to the tent. I reckon you uns had better make a move afore the canoes get carried off. I'll do what I kin fur you. If we all take paddles and run out yellin' an' screachin' mebbe the fellars will get scared and make tracks without showin' fight."

This proposition rather staggered the boys.

"The thieves probably want more than the canoes," said Ned. "It's very likely they are right outside the tent now. I hardly know what we ought to do."

"Let's give them our money and watches, and anything else they want," suggested Nugget. "If we don't they'll surely cut our throats."

"Keep quiet!" whispered Clay savagely. "If you don't I'll throw you out of the tent."

At this awful threat Nugget subsided and buried his head in his blanket.

Meanwhile Randy, whose temper was beginning to rise at the thought of being robbed, had quietly reached

for his gun, and was fumbling with it under cover of the darkness.

An unlucky move dashed the stock against his lantern, and the crash of broken glass followed. At the same moment Batters called in a loud whisper, "Here they are. I see them movin' among the trees."

At this startling news a wailing cry broke from Nugget, and an instant later a gruff voice called distinctly:

"Come out of that one at a time, young fellars. Move lively, an' you won't be harmed."

There was dead silence for a few seconds, and then the command was repeated in a more peremptory tone.

"They ain't got no shootin' weapons," whispered Batters; "only short sticks. I can see 'em by the firelight."

On hearing this, Randy was seized with a sudden access of courage. Gun in hand, he dashed by his companions to the front of the tent.

Batters saw the glint of the weapon and made a futile grab at it.

"Don't do no shootin'," he whispered hoarsely.

The warning came too late. Randy stepped out from the flaps and raised it to his shoulder.

"Make tracks, you villains," he shouted, "or I'll put daylight through you." (This was a favorite expression of Randy's purloined from the life of Kit Carson.) Then, as retreating footsteps were heard, he lowered the weapon a little and pulled the trigger.

The thunderous report was followed by a yell of pain, and two voices hissed out dire threats of vengeance as the baffled men went hastily down the slope.

As Randy turned toward his companions Batters sprang at him and wrenched the weapon from his hands.

"Didn't I tell you not to shoot?" he cried. "Now you've gone an' hit Bug. I kinder feared it might be him, but I wasn't certain. That's him swearin' this very minute. Oh! I'll fix you for this."

Pushing Randy to one side and dashing the gun on the ground, Batters vanished in the darkness, yelling at the top of his voice, "Bug! Bug! it's me!"

The boys were overcome with terror and amazement. Who in the world was Bug, and why should Batters be so anxious about him?

"Why did you do that?" demanded Ned sternly. "If you have shot any one don't expect us to shield you."

Randy did not reply. He staggered into the tent and rolled over in helpless mirth.

"It — it was — a salt cartridge," he finally was able to gasp. "I had — three or four of them. I read how to make them — in a book. Didn't I pepper their legs nicely though.

"I don't care what it was," exclaimed Ned angrily. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You'll break up this trip yet with your foolishness."

Randy sobered down in a moment or two, and when he joined the others outside the tent he was disposed

to take a less humorous view of his smart performance. A light was visible at the mouth of the brook, and four figures could be seen around it.

Joe had evidently joined his brother. The conversation that was carried on was for the most part inaudible, but now and then a threatening sentence could be heard, or a few words of entreaty.

"Serious trouble will come out of this," said Ned. "For half a cent I'd deliver you over to those fellows. Randy. The worst of it is that they were going away when you fired."

"Dodging behind trees, that's all," replied Randy.

"Not a bit of it," exclaimed Ned angrily. "They were running toward the creek."

As Clay stoutly backed up this assertion, Randy lapsed into sullen silence. He was more frightened than he chose to let appear.

After what seemed a painfully long interval to the waiting boys, Batters came softly out of the gloom and stood before them.

"I reckon there ain't no more danger," he said. "It wasn't Bug what was hit; the other fellow. He's sittin' down thar on the stones now, a pickin' lumps of salt out of his legs with a knife blade. He's mad as blazes too, an' me an Bug had all we could do ter keep him from comin' back here.

"I tole Bug how you saved my life, an' when he heard that he put his foot down an' swore you chaps shouldn't be harmed. Bug ain't bad at heart, he ain't. As soon as the other fellow gits all the salt out they're

both going away. They hev a camp somewhere's down the creek."

"But who are these men, Batters, and what do you know about them?" asked Ned.

The lad hesitated for a moment.

"I reckon I might as well make a clean breast of it," he said in a pitiful tone. "Don't you-uns think bad of me an' Joe though, cause we've been brung up different, 'deed we have —."

"Look here, Batters, you needn't tell us if you don't want to," interrupted Ned sympathetically.

He had an inkling of the true state of affairs, and wished to spare the lad what was evidently a painful recital.

"No, I'd better tell," responded Batters. "It's just this way. Bug is big brother to me and Joe, only he's about six years older than us. You see when he was a little chap dad an' mammy lived down near Middlesex, an' Bug he got in bad company. When dad moved up to the Gap, Bug was toler'ble bad, an' since then he's been gittin' worse.

"He was in Carlisle jail twict fer stealin', an' in summer he jest lives shiftless like along the creek, helpin' hisself to the farmers' stuff. Now he dassent come home no more, for dad says he won't own him fur a son. Mammy cries heaps an' says her heart's broke.

"You see dad an' mammy are honest, if they are poor, an' they made me an' Joe promise we'd never take nothin' what don't belong to us. Mammy says

she wants us ter grow up the right way, an' not be bad an' wuthless like — like Bug —."

Here Batters broke down and began to cry softly. His sad little tale — alas! only too common in all walks of life! — had deeply moved his hearers, and more than one of the boys had tears in their eyes.

Ned walked over and threw his arm around the weeping lad.

"Don't cry, Batters," he said softly. "Some day Bug will find out his mistake and begin to do better. We don't think any the less of you and Joe on his account. Stick to your mother, and do what she says, and you'll be sure to grow up the right kind of men."

Batters was consoled by this boyish sympathy. He wiped his eyes and looked gratefully at Ned.

"Here, take this," said Nugget, holding out a handsome pocket knife. "It's got four blades, and a corkscrew, and a file."

Batters looked doubtfully at the treasure. Randy had just lighted a lantern, and the rays flashed on the mother of pearl handle.

"I want you to have it," said Nugget, "my father will send me plenty more from New York."

The temptation was too much. Batters took the knife with a smile, and incoherently tried to thank the donor.

All at once the creaking of oars was heard, and a moment later Joe joined the party.

"They've gone," he anounced. "T' other fellow got tired pickin' the salt out. Bug tole him he ought

to be glad cause now he was well seasoned. Then the fellow jabbed at Bug with a knife. Missed him though."

"Well, I'm glad the affair is over," said Ned. "We'll be able to get some sleep now. Batters, suppose you and Joe come in our tent? There is room enough."

Batters hesitated and gave an awkward hitch to his trousers.

"I reckon you'd better not do any more sleepin' here," he said uneasily. "Bug pulled me aside, and said I should tell you-uns to light out afore daybreak, 'cause the other fellar will surely come back an' lay fur the chap what shot him. I dunno where Bug picked him up, or who he is. He looks like a tramp, with his dirty beard and wicked eyes. H's a mighty bad man when he gits riled, Bug says. It's a pity that chap shot him, 'cause they were both running away."

"I know that," replied Ned, "and I'm awfully sorry it happened. It was a mean, contemptible trick under the circumstances. But what had we better do now?"

"Well, I reckon it would be better to pack up and start," advised Batters. "You see Bug and the other fellar have a camp about two mile down the creek. You can slide right past it in the darkness, and if you keep on fur a good ways the fellar what was shot won't find you again. Bug tole me they didn't intend to go much further down the creek. You needn't be afraid

to travel by night, 'cause there ain't any bad water near here, an' the first dam is twelve mile away."

Ned was inclined to act promptly on Batters' suggestions, and it goes without saying that the others were of the same mind — especially Randy, who had conceived a mortal fear of Bug's companion.

It was between one and two o'clock when the boys began the work of breaking camp, and as Batters and Joe rendered useful assistance, the heavily laden canoes were in the water half an hour later. The start was made in darkness and silence. Ned thanked Batters for the important service he had rendered that night, and added a few words of comfort and sympathy.

Hands were shaken all around, and hopes expressed of meeting again. Then the Jolly Rovers paddled noiselessly away in the gloom, and Batters and Joe went up the beach to their shelter of pine boughs.

CHAPTER VIII

HOW THE DAY DAWNED

It was with no pleasant sensations that the boys found themselves for the second time adrift in the darkness. Not that they had any fears of the journey that lay before them; that was a trifling matter compared to the loss of sleep and the indignity of being routed out of their snug beds through no fault of their own.

There was no open complaint, however, and for ten or fifteen minutes the silence of the night was disturbed only by the low swish of the paddles, as the four canoes moved abreast down mid-stream.

"This thing is getting monotonous, and I hope it won't happen again," remarked Ned finally, in a very grave voice. "If you fellows had listened to me this morning we would be sound asleep this minute in some place down the creek, instead of floating here in the dark with a forced paddle of ten miles ahead of us."

"It's hard luck, that's a fact," muttered Clay.

"No luck about it," retorted Ned. "It's pure recklessness, and Randy is chiefly to blame."

"No more than the rest of you," growled Randy. "I wasn't the only one that wanted to stay."

"I don't mean that," said Ned, "though of course the trouble began there. I refer to your foolish act a little while ago. If you hadn't fired that salt cartridge the men would have gone quietly away, and we could have remained where we were until morning. Now you have made a bitter enemy, and if he don't give us future annoyance it will only be through the intercession of Batters' brother — provided he has enough influence over his companion.

"I feel glad in one way that we stayed. Batters and Joe are good hearted fellows, if they *are* rough on the outside, and it was a pleasure to become acquainted with them. I hope their brother Bug will turn over a new leaf some day, and be allowed to go home.

"But that wasn't what I started in to talk about," resumed Ned after a brief pause. "The fact is, Randy, that you must be more careful in future. You have been to blame for every one of our scrapes so far, and if you intend to keep this up we may as well abandon the cruise and go home. This is the second warning I've had to give you. The other one don't seem to have done much good."

"I think you are getting pretty meddlesome, Ned Chapman," exclaimed Randy in a sullen tone; "when I want any advice from you I'll ask for it."

"Don't give way to your temper, now," returned Ned quietly, "I'm talking for the common good, and you know it in your heart."

"Ned's right," exclaimed Clay. "This cruise has been a chapter of misadventures from the start, and every one of them lies at your door."

Randy drove his paddle into the water with furious strokes, and was soon a dozen yards ahead of his companions.

"I'll give you fellows a chance to get out of the dumps," he called back angrily. "I hope you'll be in a better humor when we meet again."

Then he drove the canoe forward so rapidly that the dip of the paddle was soon faint in the distance.

"Let him go," said Ned. "He can't come to any harm, and it will give him a good chance to cool down. That's the main trouble with Randy. Up comes his temper at the least word of rebuke, and though he knows that he is wrong, his self will and anger won't let him admit it. I believe he will take this warning to heart though."

Clay and Nugget did not reply. The former's conscience was a little bit uneasy, for he knew that his imprudent utterance had started Randy off in anger.

The three boys paddled on silently for a while, and then Nugget managed to ground the Imp on a concealed ledge of rocks. It required the united efforts of his companions to dislodge it, and even then it was a labor of nearly five minutes' duration. A canvas canoe must be handled very carefully when among the rocks.

About this time the moon came out from a bank of fleecy clouds, and the light — feeble though it was —

enabled the boys to make better speed, and to keep a watch ahead for shoals.

A moment later they wished with all their hearts that the moon was on the other side of the globe, for a bend in the channel revealed a fire on the right bank, a short distance below. The flames were partly screened by a fringe of bushes, but not sufficiently to prevent the ruddy light from flashing far across the water.

"That must be Bug Batters's camp," whispered Ned.

"It will be a ticklish operation to get by if the men are on the watch. We can manage to, though, if we are prudent and don't lose our heads. Don't breathe a word or make any noise with your paddles. Just stick close to me."

Ned headed for the left bank, which was thickly wooded, and paddled slowly and noiselessly along the very edge. The others followed his example, and in a short time the three canoes were directly opposite the fire. Two dark figures squatting beside it could be plainly seen. The dancing reflection of the flames revealed the boat pulled partially out of water, and stretched far beyond mid channel.

It was a thrilling moment. Discovery at first seemed inevitable, for the men were facing the creek. But as no alarm came, and the canoes crept deeper into the friendly gloom, the boys began to breathe more easily.

They did not relax their caution until the fire was

two or three hundred yards in the rear. Then Ned signified that the danger was over by paddling boldly and swiftly toward mid-channel.

"I hope we have seen the last of Bug Batters and his companion," he said, "and I really believe that they won't give us any more trouble."

"I'm glad to hear you say so," replied Clay. "That's my opinion, too. If we put about ten miles between us and them we ought to feel safe."

"Better make it twenty," remarked Nugget uneasily. "Then we will be twice as safe."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," laughed Ned. "I say, fellows, it must have been a pretty stiff ordeal for Randy to go by that fire, within sight of the man he peppered with salt."

"Well, I should say so," returned Clay. "When we catch up with him we'll ask him how he felt."

"But that won't be for some time to come," said Ned, "unless we move a little faster. Try to keep up with me, and don't lag behind."

He started off with short, quick strokes, and after a brief race the others settled down abreast of him.

The moon outlined the limits of the creek very distinctly, shining first from one side, then from the other, as the channel followed its tortuous course. The water continued deep and fairly swift, and during the next hour and a half the boys must have paddled no less than six or seven miles.

Nothing was seen of Randy, but this fact was easily explained, since he had gained considerable on his

companions at the start, and had moreover a light and easily running canoe.

Presently the sky to the eastward became faintly streaked with gray, and the close night air was succeeded by a fragrant and delicious breeze. Dawn came on apace, heralded by the singing of birds, and the splashing of fish in search of the early insect. The mist began to rise from the water, and in some distant barnyard hungry cattle lowed.

"There is some compensation in night travel," said Ned. "It will be a treat to see the sun come up. Two or three miles more and then we'll hunt a snug camping place, and have a plunge in the creek, and a good breakfast on top of it, and sleep until afternoon. I don't feel very tired just now, but I'm ravenously hungry."

"So am I," echoed Clay and Nugget in one breath.

As the daylight advanced the boys paddled on with light hearts. In the long level stretch that was now ahead of them no sign of Randy was visible. As the next bend — an unusually sharp one — drew near, a dull, roaring sound was heard.

"That must be a bit of swift water," observed Ned; "I hope it's long enough to give us a good spin."

"But won't it be dangerous?" asked Nugget uneasily.

"Of course not," replied Clay. "There couldn't be any danger on a small stream like this, and besides Batters told us everything was smooth for twelve miles ahead."

It is more than probable that when Batters made this statement he had in mind his own safe and bulky craft, which could have stood any amount of rough usage without upsetting. But this version of the matter did not occur to the boys. They confidently paddled on, hoping to find a stretch of swift water that would give them a lift on their journey.

Just at the commencement of the curve a spit of rocks and trees jutted out from the right shore. As the boys were whirled swiftly around this, the first brief glimpse of what lay beyond proved far from satisfactory.

The creek narrowed to half its former width, and the greater part of even this contracted channel was rendered unnavigable by a long bar of gravel and grass, over which an inch or so of water crawled sluggishly. The main channel — only half a dozen feet wide — headed abruptly to the right, and swept at breakneck speed in a perfect half circle under the outwardly projecting base of a steep and wooded hill. Here and there the bushes hung down to meet the madly tossing waves, and swayed violently.

It was already too late to turn back, and it was equally out of the question to cut across the swift rushing current and gain the shallow bar. Speedy disaster would have resulted from *that* step.

Ned was half a canoe's length in advance, and without a second's delay he swung the bow of the Pioneer around to meet the curve of the channel.

"Paddle toward the left! — the left!" he shouted

hoarsely to his companions. "Keep your heads down when you come to the bushes."

Ned had no chance to say more. His own affairs required his undivided attention. With a dizzy jerk he swung into the half circle, rising and falling with the huge waves. A few tremendous paddle strokes deflected him to the left, and fortunately he cleared the outer fringe of bushes.

Just when the worst seemed to be over the Pioneer ran broadside on a submerged rock, tipped instantly, and out went Ned head over heels.

He was dragged clear to the bottom of the rapids before he could gain a foothold. Then, waist deep in water, he grabbed the Pioneer as it drifted by him, and waded with it to a narrow landing place at the base of the hill.

Even less fortunate was Nugget. The dizzy whirl of the current and the jolting motion of the waves so terrified him that he dropped his paddle and clutched the combing with both hands. Then, as the bushes directly ahead caught his eye, he threw up his arms and seized them.

The next instant the canoe was whisked from under him, leaving him clinging to the frail support, shrieking with terror and bobbing up and down on the waves. He remained in this position only a few seconds. Clay's canoe struck him obliquely, and the concussion caused it to swing broadside and upset. Both lads were rolled over and over to the foot of the rapids, where Ned helped them and their canoes to shore.

CHAPTER IX

A SAFE SHELTER

For a moment the three wrecked Jolly Rovers could only stare blankly at their dripping clothes, and at one another. The whole thing had taken place so quickly that they did not as yet realize the extent of the misfortune.

Finally Ned and Clay broke into a hearty laugh, while Nugget sat down on a rock and wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Hullo, there!" cried a familiar voice, as Randy appeared from behind a patch of bushes a few yards down the shore. "Great Cæsar! what a mess you fellows are in!"

"Thanks to you," replied Ned. "Why didn't you come up the creek and warn us?"

"That's just what I was on my way to do, 'pon my honor it was. I couldn't get here a minute sooner. I upset in that beastly place myself, and was carried down below those bushes. Look at that!" Randy pointed to his muddy feet and wet clothes. It was evident that he was speaking the truth.

"Well, what's done can't be undone," said Ned.

"We must make the best of it. I'm afraid the water has spoilt a good deal of our stuff."

"You can count yourselves lucky if your canoes aren't injured," rejoined Randy. "The rocks tore the keel nearly off of mine, and it leaks like a basket."

"Then we are in for a long delay," exclaimed Ned vexatiously. "It's unfortunate just at this time, when we ought to be four or five miles farther down the stream."

"You won't think so when I show you the place I've found," replied Randy. "We could camp there for a month, and no one would be any the wiser. It's over on the left shore where the current first landed me. I had a look at the spot and then waded to this side with the canoe."

"The first thing is to get dry clothes on," returned Ned. "The morning air is too cool for comfort."

"Down below here is just the place you want then," said Randy. "A big gravel bar. The sun shines on it beautifully."

This statement brought a smile even to Nugget's face, and without delay the boys proceeded down the creek.

As it was impossible to get any wetter they waded, pushing the canoes ahead of them. The gravel bar was twenty yards below, in mid-channel, and sure enough the first rays of the sun fell full upon it.

The canoes were speedily denuded of everything they held, and the gravel was soon strewn with water soaked bread, crackers, blankets, fishing rods, writing

paper, and envelopes. The other provisions, being incased in jars, were uninjured; and so also were the extra clothes, thanks to the oiled canvas bags in which they were wrapped.

The boys quickly made the change, and stretched out their wet garments to dry. The canoes were placed bottom up to drain, and after satisfying himself that the Water Sprite was damaged beyond immediate repair, Ned suggested that Randy should point out the place he had discovered.

The latter was only too willing, and when the boys had followed his instructions by rolling their trousers above their knees, he led them through the shallow water toward the left shore.

As they advanced nothing was visible but the low bank, densely covered with bushes and young timber. Randy was several yards in advance, and all at once he stooped and disappeared. The others followed his example, and when they had waded with bent backs under a heavy screen of bushes, they were amazed to find themselves in the mouth of a good sized stream.

The water was knee deep, and flowed gently over a bed of sand and pebbles. For a distance of sixty or seventy feet inland the stream was three or four yards wide; then came a deep circular pool fed by a brawling waterfall that dashed impetuously down a mossy incline of rocks. On all sides were inviting clumps of bushes, and slender trees bending over their weight of foliage, while from branch to branch swung foxgrape vines.

Near the head of the pool was a grassy open spot shaded by half a dozen monster shellbark trees — a perfect little Eden. In fact the whole scene was so entrancing to these lads, who well knew how to appreciate Nature's most charming moods, that they stood still with the cool water surging against their knees, to look and listen.

The sunlight filtered obliquely through the leaves, gleaming here and there in the dark thickets like stray gold, and shimmering on the eddies of the pool. The air was fragrant with the scent of wild flowers, and from every direction came the music of birds and the busy chattering of squirrels.

"I knew you fellows would fall in love with the place," said Randy. "Just think of spending two or three days here — or maybe a week. There's nothing to prevent it. Under those shellbark trees is a grand place for a tent, and here is water enough to float fifty canoes. The bushes completely hide the entrance, and when we are all fixed snug I'll defy Bug Batters or any one else to find us in a month. What do you say, Ned? Do you think it's necessary now to go farther down the creek?"

Ned drew a long breath.

"I think this is the most beautiful spot I ever saw," he replied. "I'll stay here a week if the rest are willing."

The rest *were* willing — emphatically so. Clay immediately began to indulge in visions of trout fishing farther up the stream, which must have its source in

the mountains. Nugget declared it was a good place to rest, while Randy expressed an opinion that game was plentiful in the vicinity.

Having waded to the edge of the pool, where the water deepened abruptly, the boys returned as they had come, and were soon back on the gravel bar. They were too hungry to go to the trouble of making a fire, so they breakfasted on damp crackers and dried beef, and found them very palatable, too.

Then, as the sun had already dried the things, the canoes were loaded and pushed up the mouth of the stream. The boys took good care to remove every trace of their presence from the bar, and to deftly rearrange the screen of bushes after passing through.

The tent was soon staked under the shellbark trees, and the canoes were carried out beside it. The Jolly Rovers now felt as safe as though they were fifty miles down the creek. Being pretty well exhausted by the interruption of the previous night and by their long paddle, they made pillows out of their blankets, and went to sleep on the grassy floor of the tent.

But it is not an easy matter to turn day into night, and so the boys found it. Ned awoke about noon, and threw the flap open so that the sun could stream into the tent — as much of it at least as came through the thick foliage. It was sufficient to rouse Randy and Nugget. Clay was missing, but as his fishing rod had also disappeared, no alarm was felt over this fact.

Of course dinner immediately suggested itself, so

Ned started to make the fire, while Randy inspected the supplies to see what was available.

"Damp crackers and cold meat are about all we can count on," he announced dismally. "There are only a half a dozen potatoes here. You might boil some oatmeal, though."

"We must get along with what we have," replied Ned. "This afternoon some of us must make a foraging expedition. We can't be very far from a farmhouse."

The fire was soon blazing merrily, and just as Ned placed the coffee pot on the bars, a cheery whistle rang through the woods, and Clay appeared at the head of the pool.

"See what you lazy fellows have missed," he exclaimed, holding up a string of speckled brook trout. "I caught all those in the last two hours, and tramped more than a mile up stream to get them."

The boys were delighted at this unexpected addition to their dinner, and the spotted beauties were soon ready for the frying pan. Hunger made a piquant sauce, and the crackers, meat and fish vanished in short order.

"I intend to let you fellows wash the dishes this time," said Ned, when the meal was concluded. "I'm going after supplies. We certainly need them badly enough. Did you see any signs of a farmhouse when you were up the stream, Clay?"

"No indeed. The woods are thick in every direction, and I have no doubt they stretch clear to the

mountains. It's awfully wild and lonesome along the stream."

"No use in trying that direction then," replied Ned. "I think I'll go down the creek in my canoe."

"Let me go with you," said Randy. "You may have a big load to carry back you know."

Ned hesitated an instant, and then gave his consent. He really preferred to be alone, but he saw that Randy was very sorry for his recent ill conduct, and wanted to make what amends he could.

Clay loaned Randy his canoe, and promised to repair the Water Sprite during the latter's absence. Then the foraging expedition paddled out into the creek, equipped with tin pails and canvas sacks.

Clay and Nugget were at no loss to find occupation. It required a good half hour to wash and dry the dishes, and after that a big stack of firewood was piled up. Then the Water Sprite was placed across two logs, and Clay proceeded to make the needed repairs. Having screwed the keel firmly in place, he thrust cotton under its whole length with his knife blade, and then put on a plentiful coating of white lead.

"There!" he exclaimed, as he surveyed his own work with satisfaction. "That canoe won't leak a drop in the morning. I say, Nugget, let's go fishing a little while. It's only five o'clock, and the boys won't be back for an hour or two yet."

Nothing could have pleased Nugget more. He made the proviso, however, that Randy's gun should be taken along.

"I don't know what you're afraid of," said Clay; "but I'll humor you anyhow."

He shouldered the weapon, first looking to see that it was loaded, and started up the stream. Nugget trudged behind with the two fishing rods.

Half a mile from camp the boys stopped by a deep pool that presented a very tempting aspect. The bushes and trees were dense all around it.

"This is where I caught my first fish this morning," whispered Clay, as he put a nice fat worm on the hook and dropped it in the water.

Almost instantly the line tightened, and the slender rod bent. Clay gave a quick pull, and something shiny whizzed through the air, landing with a dull flop some yards behind the boys.

"That was a big fellow," exclaimed Clay. "It flew clear off the hook. Get it for me, Nugget, will you? I want to catch another."

Nugget obligingly dropped the hook he was baiting, and crawled on hands and knees into the thicket.

A few seconds later he burst out, yelling wildly for help, while a crackling of bushes behind him told plainly that something or someone was in close pursuit.

CHAPTER X

A TRAMP ACROSS COUNTRY

NUGGET dashed by Clay without stopping, and crossed the stream, close to the lower end of the pool, in two or three frantic leaps.

Clay was frightened himself, but observing that the rustling noise in the thicket had ceased, he boldly stood his ground, taking the precaution, however, to exchange his fishing rod for the gun.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, turning warily toward Nugget, who was on the opposite side of the stream with one hand clasping the low boughs of a pine tree.

"There's some wild animal in there," cried Nugget hoarsely. "It looked at me with its shining eyes, and then growled. Shoot it quick, before it comes out."

Just then the rustling in the thicket recommenced, and with wonderful celerity Nugget disappeared into the heart of the tree.

But the creature, whatever it might be, was going in the opposite direction from the pool. This emboldened Clay, and without hesitation he started in pursuit, paying no attention to Nugget's appealing

cries. Guided by the threshing of bushes he pushed on for ten or twenty yards.

Then it suddenly occurred to him that the animal might be a wildcat or even a bear, that had strayed down from the mountains. A close encounter of this nature was by no means to Clay's liking. He stopped, and was just about turning back, when he saw a dark object passing through a break in the thicket about thirty feet away.

The shadows were too deep to afford a good glimpse of the animal, but Clay did not hesitate. Drawing the gun to his shoulder he took quick aim and fired.

When the smoke cleared the creature had vanished, but from a distance came a queer grunting noise mingled with the hasty crashing of the bushes.

"I believe that was a bear," muttered Clay, "and unless I'm greatly mistaken I put a few shot into his hind quarters."

He stood listening until the sounds had died away, and then retraced his steps toward the pool, satisfied that no more trouble was to be apprehended from the unwelcome prowler.

Nugget was still in the tree, and came down very reluctantly, even when he knew what had happened. Then the boys shouldered their fishing rods and hurried back to camp, arriving there just as Ned and Randy paddled up the mouth of the stream.

Clay's adventure — which he related with conscious pride — caused somewhat of a sensation. Randy and

Nugget wanted to break camp at once, and Clay was more than inclined to side with them.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ned. "I don't believe it was a wild animal at all, and even if it was it would hardly come near here again after being shot at."

"Then what could it have been?" demanded Clay a little sharply.

"Some stray domestic creature, as likely as not," answered Ned.

Clay did not reply. He was far from unwilling to accept this version of the affair, though he still had his doubts.

The others were reassured by Ned's words, and when the fruits of the foraging expedition were taken from the canoes all else was forgotten but supper.

"Won't we have a feast?" said Randy. "Just see here, fellows. Fresh, yellow butter, a pail of milk, three pies, two loaves of bread, a cup of cheese, a picked duck, and potatoes and apples! We had a time to get them, though — a mile and a half down the creek, and half a mile over the fields."

It was nearly dark when supper was ready, and the meal was eaten with such slow enjoyment that nine o'clock arrived before the last of the dishes were washed and put away. Then the tired boys went to bed, after securing the tent flaps with more than usual care.

No alarm disturbed their sleep that night. Wednesday dawned clear as a whistle. Before the sun was fairly up the boys took a plunge in the cool depths of

the pool, and the result was such a crop of voracious appetites that Randy predicted another foraging expedition before the day was over.

After breakfast Ned sat down on a stone, and spreading a lengthy paper on his knees, began to study it intently.

"What have you there?" asked Randy.

"A map of the Cumberland Valley," replied Ned. "Do you know, we almost forgot about our mail arrangements? It's a good thing I remembered it this morning. If this stream we are camping on now is Otter Run — and according to the map it is — then West Hill is only half a dozen miles due east of us.

"That is the first place we were to expect letters, and we won't get any nearer to it than we are now. I think I'll walk over. You may go with me, Clay, if you like. The distance is too much for Nugget, and it's Randy's turn to stay in camp."

No objection was made to this arrangement, and all hurriedly produced paper and pencils and sat down on the grass to write letters home.

"I'm asking for a cake," said Randy. "Where shall I have it sent?"

"Carlisle," answered Ned. "We will be there next week. Tell them to make it a big one."

"And not to forget to put icing on it," added Clay.

"Oh, that goes without telling," said Randy laughingly. "They know what I like."

In half an hour all the letters were sealed and addressed. Then Ned and Clay brushed off their clothes

and put on neckties, greatly to Randy's amusement.

"What are you laughing at?" exclaimed Ned. "Don't you know that we may be invited out to dinner at West Hill? I wish I had a dress suit with me."

"What a pity you haven't," said Randy mockingly. "Nugget will lend you his yachting cap."

"Of course I will," said Nugget in all seriousness. "Say, Ned," he whispered, coming up close, "I — I have a white shirt in my bag and a dotted vest. I thought they might come in handy. You are quite welcome to them, you know, if —"

Nugget's indiscreet confession went no further. Ned rolled on the ground, choking with laughter. He actually couldn't help it.

Clay and Randy had heard every word, and poor Nugget was finally obliged to take refuge in the tent.

"This won't do," said Ned, struggling to keep a sober face. "We must be off. I hope you won't get in any fresh scrapes while we are away, Randy. You had better stay about camp. You may look for us back some time this afternoon — not later than four o'clock."

"Oh, I won't have time to get in mischief," laughed Randy. "It will take all day to write my log book up to date. I haven't touched it since night before last."

It was about half past nine o'clock when the boys started. They paddled across the creek and landed at the foot of the hill. Randy accompanied them in the

Water Sprite, so that he could tow the canoe back with him.

"Just you fellows sing out," he said. "I'll hear you and come across."

"All right," returned Ned, as he commenced the steep ascent of the hill, with Clay at his heels.

Reaching the summit they turned and waved their hands to Randy, who was slowly paddling toward camp, far below them.

Of the camp itself not a vestige could be seen, even from this elevation.

Then the boys set their faces toward the east, and strode briskly through the pine forest that covered the level plateau. For a mile or two the land was very rugged and lonely. Then open fields began to appear here and there, and an occasional farmhouse nestled amid orchards in a valley, or standing boldly against the sky from a hill top.

Such implicit faith did Ned place in his map that he shunned the roads, and did not think it worth while to stop at any of the farmhouses to ask information. With a view to reaching the village in the most direct manner, he cut straight across country, skirting fields of grain and corn, it is true, but taking everything else as it came — hills, ravines, orchards, and meadows.

And all this time the boys were making one of the most foolish blunders that can well be imagined — taking into consideration, of course, the peculiar nature of the creek and the constantly shifting scenery

through which they were passing. Later on, when the consequences of their thoughtlessness stared them in the face, they wondered how they could have been so blind.

When the farmhouse bells began to clang from distant points the boys knew that it was half past eleven o'clock.

"We have surely covered six miles in two hours," said Ned. "West Hill can't be far away. No doubt we will see it from that next ridge."

But when the ridge was gained no village was in sight. Something else was visible, however — a narrow country road, running at right angles to the direction from which the boys had come; and nailed to the fence was a sign post, inscribed in crooked black letters as follows:

TO WEST HILL
3 MILES.

There was nothing for it but to go on, and that they did in a weary, dispirited manner.

"The map can't be wrong," said Ned, "the trouble is that we veered a little too far south in our course. We'll make a nearer cut of it on the return trip. Walk a little faster, Clay; it will be a tight squeeze to reach camp by four o'clock."

It wanted a little less than three hours to that time when the boys reached the little cluster of six houses

which comprised West Hill. The signboard had probably told only half the truth in regard to distance — as country signboards usually do.

The postoffice was, of course, combined with a produce store. At this time of day its only occupants were the proprietor and a grizzled old farmer puffing at a corncob pipe.

The letters were soon mailed, and in response to Ned's inquiry he was handed a weighty hat box addressed to Randolph Moore, and a batch of half a dozen letters.

"I'll bet a dollar that's a cake," said Clay. "It will tickle Randy."

"It wouldn't tickle him if he had to carry it about nine miles," replied Ned ruefully, "and the box says 'handle with care,' too."

However, the cake could not be left behind, and the boys agreed to carry it by turns.

"How far is Otter Run from here in a straight line?" inquired Ned of the storekeeper.

"'Bout eleven mile," was the reply. "Ain't that kerect, Bowser?"

"It's mor'n that by road," said the old farmer, taking his pipe from his lips. "It's a good thirteen mile to Tanner's Dam, an' the run comes in just below the mill race."

The boys exchanged glances of dismay.

"That map fooled me after all," muttered Ned. "The camp can't be anywhere near Otter Run."

He then explained the situation to the two men, de-

scribing as minutely as possible the location of the camp. Both wagged their heads dubiously.

"I can't fix it to a sartainty," said the storekeeper.

"Nor kin I," observed Mr. Bowser. "There air heaps of jest sich runs, an' high hills an' bits of bad water — same as you chaps tell about."

It was evident that no positive information could be obtained, so the boys said "good day," and left the store.

"Under the circumstances we won't risk making a bee line for camp," said Ned. "If we had any landmarks to go by it would be different."

"Then must we go back the way we came?" asked Clay.

"Exactly; we have nine weary miles to tramp. I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. Just think of a good supper and a snug bed, Clay, and you won't mind the distance so much."

"It's this confounded box that worries me," muttered Clay. "I believe I'd sooner carry a feather bed. The crazy thing jerks when I stick it under one arm, and if I hug it to my breast it hits me on the chin every few seconds. It's so heavy that the cords cut my hand if I try to carry it that way. I wish I could balance it on my head."

Clay did not exaggerate the perverse and obstinate nature of that hat box. It changed bearers no less than six times before the mendacious signpost was reached, and then its victims were so exhausted that they had to lie down on the grass and rest.

CHAPTER XI

SEARCHING FOR THE CAMP

It was already past three o'clock when the boys resumed their tramp, abandoning the road and heading across country along the same course by which they had come.

For the first two or three miles they did not pay any special attention to the scenery around them; they were kept busy climbing fences and hills, and taking care of the refractory cake box, which became more and more of a burden every moment. Finally as they were descending a long wooded slope, Ned was amazed to discover that the mountains, instead of being straight ahead, lay off to the right.

"That's a funny mistake," he said. "I wonder how long we have been moving parallel with the creek instead of toward it? Some of those snaky ravines we passed through must have turned us around without our knowing it."

"I hope we haven't lost the path," returned Clay. "Nothing about here looks familiar to me, but then I didn't pay much attention to the scenery this morning."

"Neither did I," replied Ned uneasily, "and I'm afraid that's just where we made a big mistake. If we

had only noted some landmarks as we came along, we would not be in this fix now. It really is a pretty serious fix, Clay. You see we can't tell how long we have been traveling in this wrong direction. The only thing we can do now is to head straight for the mountains, and run the chances of striking the creek in the vicinity of the camp."

"That's true," assented Clay. "I hope we'll reach it before dark. Randy and Nugget will be pretty badly scared if we don't."

They started off again, headed this time in the proper direction. Of course the mountains were visible only at rare intervals, and this added to the perplexity of the situation, since it is very difficult to keep on a straight line unless some guiding point is constantly in view.

It was soon evident that the boys were far astray from the path they had followed that morning. The country was more lonely and rugged — a continual succession of steep hills and dense bits of forest. Few farmhouses were visible, and those only at a distance.

The sun sank lower and lower as they trudged wearily along. The many miles already covered that day were beginning to tell on them severely. They were hungry, too, having eaten nothing since breakfast.

"I wish we had bought some crackers and cheese at the store," said Ned; "I thought about it when we were nearly a mile away, but it was too late then to go back."

"We have Randy's cake," replied Clay. "I'm

going to break into it if we don't soon reach camp. I don't remember when I was so hungry as I am now."

"Wait a little while," said Ned. "The creek surely can't be far away. The chances are that it lies beyond that next hill."

The hill to which he had reference was a good half mile distant, and the pine trees on its crest loomed sharply against the blue sky. Ere reaching it the boys were destined to be deprived of their burden in a very aggravating manner — and just when they had begun to appreciate its value as a means of satisfying their hunger.

As they emerged from a copse of hazel bushes on a narrow country road, a big black dog bounded from the step of a little cabin a few yards away, and came at them in a most ferocious manner. The boys darted across the road and into a clover field through a broken place in the fence.

The dog followed, paying not the least attention to the loud commands of a woman who stood in the cabin door. When Ned wheeled around the brute was within a dozen feet of him, growling savagely, showing his fangs and teeth, and coming on at a pace which meant business.

Shouting had no effect whatever, and as not a stick or a stone was within reach, the boy's situation was far from pleasant. But he had the cake box in his arms, and on the impulse of the moment he lifted it over his head with both hands and dashed it with all his might at the advancing brute.

It struck him fairly on the nose, breaking open with the force of the blow, and turning the angry snarls into a shrill yelp of pain. Ned did not wait to see the result, but dashed across the field to overtake Clay.

When they turned and looked back from a safe distance, the dog was greedily devouring the broken cake.

"We won't be troubled with that any more," said Ned. "I had to do it, or the brute would have bitten me. I don't think Randy will blame me much."

"It means good-by to our supper though," replied Clay, "and from the way that dog eats, his appetite won't be more than half satisfied when he finishes the cake. We had better be moving on."

This was prudent advice, and the boys made quick time across the field, not feeling thoroughly safe until they were in the shelter of the woods. The ground now began to ascend, and a few moments later they gained the top of the hill and saw the silvery thread of the creek shining far below them.

It took some time to descend, owing to the steepness of the slope, and the rocks and bushes that obstructed the way. When they finally reached the water's edge the duskiness of twilight had come, and they knew that darkness would follow in a short time.

"I haven't the faintest idea where we are," said Ned uneasily; "of course we are above the camp, no doubt of that; but just how far, is the important question. I feel like kicking myself for making that awful blunder to-day. It would be a nice thing if we had to tramp all night."

"You don't think the camp is that far away?" exclaimed Clay in alarm.

"Oh, no," replied Ned reassuringly. "We'll probably strike it before long. The only thing we can do is to follow the creek until we reach it."

Ned's words were far from expressing what was really in his mind. He knew that the camp might be very close in a straight line, and yet miles away by the tortuous windings of the creek. And the latter was the only possible course to take. If they attempted the former they would almost certainly become hopelessly lost.

It was soon evident that the worst might be expected. In the deepening gloom the boys hurried along the shore as fast as their weary feet would take them. Then the blackness of the night settled down on the water and the forests, and they were compelled to move cautiously; for trees and bushes were thick, and here and there a ravine had to be crossed, or a brawling stream.

Ned bravely kept up his spirits, and did his best to cheer Clay.

"It can't be much farther," he would say now and then; "keep your ears open for the roar of those rapids. That will tell us when we are near camp."

But the night lengthened without bringing the welcome sound, and at last the boys found their progress abruptly barred by a steep bluff that fell abruptly into the water. It was not the hill that lay in the vicinity of camp, else the rapids could surely have been heard.

The night was very still, except for an occasional noise in the forest that made the boys start.

They were confronted now by two equally unpleasant alternatives — either to remain where they were until morning, or to make a detour around the hill, and try to reach the creek on the lower side.

They chose the latter, and started up through the woods hand in hand. They might have foreseen what would happen. The night was very dark, and after floundering about through the bushes they became hopelessly lost, and knew not which way to turn in search of the creek.

Clay was quite in despair, but Ned persuaded him to move on, and after tramping for ten or fifteen minutes without the least idea which way they were headed, they reached a fence that separated the woods from an open field. As they mounted the top bar and perched themselves there for a short rest, Ned uttered a cry of delight, and pointed out a flickering yellow gleam far across the field.

"Hurrah! that must be the camp," exclaimed Clay, springing impetuously from the fence. "Come on; let's run for it. I don't feel a bit tired now."

"Not too fast," cried Ned warningly. "You're jumping at a rash conclusion now, Clay. That light is in the window of some farmhouse. It stands to reason that it can't be at our camp."

Clay stopped and retraced his steps.

"I was dead sure it was the campfire," he said dismally. "I thought our troubles were over."

"Perhaps they are," replied Ned slowly. "We'll go up to that farmhouse and find out exactly how the land lies. If the camp is not far off, we'll borrow a lantern and push on — otherwise we'll ask for a place to sleep until morning."

This arrangement was thoroughly satisfactory to Clay, and the boys started briskly across the field. They found an orchard at the farther end, and after passing through this and rounding the corner of the barn, they saw the house in front of them.

It stood in a good sized yard inclosed by a picket fence. The light was in one of the upper front rooms, where some late retiring member of the family was no doubt preparing for bed.

"It won't do to make any racket," said Ned, "because there may be a dog around. We'll go quietly in and rap on the door."

The boys softly opened the gate and entered the yard. In spite of the utmost caution their feet made a crunching noise on the gravel path, and the consequence was that before they were half way to the house a dog began to bark furiously. Worse still, the sound came from between them and the fence, so that escape was cut off.

"This way," cried Ned, dashing toward the corner of the house. "We may find shelter in the outbuildings."

He had taken but a dozen steps when his feet clattered on some loose boards. These gave way with a crash, and after a brief drop through empty space, he

plunged into ice cold water, going clear under the surface.

The noise of the splitting wood that followed warned Clay of his danger. He stood stock still, trembling in every limb.

The dog did not appear to be coming any nearer, and his shrill barking was now mingled with the clank of chains. All at once Clay comprehended the situation. The brute was fastened to his kennel somewhere near the gate, and was therefore powerless to do harm.

Clay's presence of mind quickly returned. He drew a match from his pocket and struck it on his shoe just as a feeble cry for help came apparently from the bowels of the earth.

As the blaze flared up Clay saw the partially covered mouth of a well just in front of him. The gap between the planking showed where Ned had fallen through.

Clay was terribly alarmed, but he had sufficient presence of mind to kneel beside the orifice and hold the match down.

"Are you hurt, Ned?" he cried huskily. "Can you hold out for a moment or two?"

"I'm all right so far," came the reply in a feeble, chattering voice. "I can't stand it long, though. The water is over my head, and I'm holding on to the cracks in the wall. Waken the family, quick!"

CHAPTER XIII

OVER THE CLIFF

NED'S last injunction was quite unnecessary. The loud outcry of the dog had already roused the family.

Heads were poked from two or three windows, and a shrill feminine voice was shouting: "Get the gun, pap, get the gun!"

Meanwhile Clay continued to call for help at the top of his voice, finally drowning out the ferocious barking of the dog, and after what seemed an interminable length of time the door of the house opened and the farmer appeared on the threshold, attired in shirt and trousers.

He had a gun in one hand and a candle in the other. Behind him were two good sized lads armed with clubs, while the flutter of a petticoat was visible on the stairway.

"Hurry! hurry!" cried Clay. "There's some one down the well."

The farmer crossed the yard with provoking calmness, holding his gun ready for use.

"Why, it's only a boy!" he exclaimed, on catching sight of Clay. "What are you doing here, you young rascal?"

"Don't stop to ask questions now," implored Clay. "Get my friend out of the well, or he will be drowned."

The farmer uttered an exclamation, and peeped through the broken boards. Then he seized the bucket that was suspended by a windlass over the well and quickly lowered it.

"Catch hold down there," he shouted gruffly.

"All right, go ahead," came the sepulchral response, a moment later.

The farmer and his two sons threw their weight on the handle of the windlass, and after considerable creaking and groaning Ned was brought to the surface and helped out on the ground. His face and hands were blue and his teeth chattered violently.

"Bring the poor fellow right in," called the farmer's wife from the porch, where she had witnessed the whole affair. "I'll go light the fire."

"The rascal don't deserve it," muttered the farmer, but nevertheless he led the boys into the house, and thence to a large room containing a stove, a table, a huge settee and half a dozen chairs. A lamp was burning on the mantel, and a pleasant faced old lady was bustling about the stove.

Ned's wet clothes were quickly stripped off, and he was rolled in blankets and made to lie down on the settee. Presently the old lady brought him a bowl of steaming camomile tea, and after he had swallowed most of the nauseous mixture he began to feel quite himself again. Then, seeing that the farmer was sus-

picious and anxious for an explanation, he insisted on talking, and related the whole story in such a clear and concise manner that his hearers were thoroughly convinced.

The farmer thawed out, and showed himself in his true colors — a genial, kind-hearted old man. He told the boys his name was Adam Plunkett, and laughingly apologized for mistaking them for thieves.

When Mrs. Plunkett heard that they had eaten nothing since breakfast she immediately began to set the table — in spite of the fact that it was then half past ten o'clock. Ned refused to be treated as an invalid any longer, so Mr. Plunkett gave him a suit of clothes to wear while his own were drying.

The food was soon ready, and the famished boys did it full justice.

"I reckon you'll want to go to bed now," said Mr. Plunkett; "you must be worn out after all that tramp. In the morning I'll tell you how to find your camp. I recognize the place from your description. It's about five miles and a half from here by road, and a good bit further by the creek."

The boys gasped with amazement. It was hard to realize that they had strayed so far out of their way.

"I'm afraid our companions will be greatly worried," said Ned. "That's all I'm thinking about."

"A little worry won't hurt 'em," asserted Mr. Plunkett cheerfully. "It'll do 'em good, and make them more glad to see you in the morning."

This bit of philosophy had its effect on the boys, and

the last trace of anxiety vanished when their host conducted them to the room they were to occupy. It was the typical country "spare bed-chamber." Home spun carpet covered the floor, and on the walls were cardboard mottoes in walnut frames, a sampler yellow with age, and portraits of George and Martha Washington. The bed was a huge four poster, and stood so high that the boys had to give a spring in order to climb in.

They fell asleep almost instantly, and found it difficult to get up in the morning when the farmer banged on the door with his heavy fist.

Mrs. Plunkett had a delicious breakfast ready when the boys came down stairs, and after they had eaten their fill the farmer carefully instructed them how to reach their camp — or rather how to reach a certain point on the creek which was less than a quarter of a mile above the rapids.

The boys had read the character of their hosts sufficiently well to know that it would be regarded as an insult if they should offer them money. So they thanked them profusely for their generous treatment, and said "good-by," promising to stop if they ever chanced to be in that vicinity again.

After a good sleep and a good breakfast the five mile walk was a trifle to the boys. They had no difficulty in following the directions, and about half past ten o'clock they turned aside from the road and entered a piece of woods.

Ten minutes later they stood on the bank of the

creek, listening to the familiar sound of the rapids below them. The steep hill began at this point, making it impossible to follow the shore, so they began the ascent and reached the crest after a pretty stiff climb. The camp was now directly opposite, though entirely concealed by the huge shellbark trees.

"Let's give them the yell," said Ned. He placed his hand to his mouth and uttered a regular Indian war whoop that woke the echoes for a long distance. Clay did the same, and they both stopped to listen.

A minute went by in silence, and then another. No glad shout of welcome rang out from the trees. No graceful canoe parted the fringe of bushes that concealed the mouth of the run.

What was the matter? Were the boys sleeping so soundly that the signal could not rouse them? This seemed the only possible explanation, so Clay and Ned shouted more vigorously than ever, and kept it up until they were hoarse.

Not a sound came back. The silence of the morning was absolutely unbroken.

The boys looked at each other with pale and frightened faces. They dared not even whisper the terrible thoughts that were in their minds. Then, by tacit consent, they scrambled down the ragged face of the hill, and at great peril to life and limb gained the bottom in three or four minutes.

They partly undressed to wade to the gravel bar, for the water was more than waist deep. Here they stopped a moment to put on their clothes, and then,

with trousers rolled high up, they waded to the mouth of the stream, and pushed eagerly through the screen of bushes.

The scene that met their gaze filled them with dread and amazement. *The glade was deserted. Every vestige of the camp had disappeared.*

For a moment the boys could scarcely believe the evidence of their own eyes. They hurried forward and inspected every foot of the ground.

Absolutely nothing had been left behind. The downtrodden grass, where the tent had stood, was the only evidence to show that a camp had recently been here.

"This is a bigger mystery than I can see through," said Ned as he bent over the blackened stones of the fireplace. "The boys must have left here some time yesterday, for these ashes are cold. It looks as though they had to leave in a hurry, too, for if they had any time to spare they would surely have placed a message where we could see it. I have examined all the trees and bushes, and there is no sign of any."

"It's a bad business," replied Clay. "The boys would not have broken camp without some cause. I only hope that Bug Batters and his companions had nothing to do with it."

The same fear was in Ned's mind just then, and it was very natural that it should be. How else could the disappearance of the boys be accounted for?

"We can't tell anything about it," he answered evasively, "and it would be very foolish to jump at

the worst conclusions. It will be our best plan to start down the creek at once, and I have no doubt we'll find the camp before very long. It's not at all likely the boys have moved far away."

"But they may have concealed themselves somewhere," said Clay, "and besides we don't know which bank they are on."

"We'll keep a sharp lookout on both sides," replied Ned. "If we shout every now and then I don't think we can miss them. We had better start right away. I'm getting tired of wandering about the country in this fashion. It will feel awfully good to climb in a canoe again."

Clay warmly assented to this, and after a last lingering glance at the shady thickets and the eddying surface of the pool, the boys plodded off through the woods.

For a time they experienced no difficulty in following the edge of the creek, and thus scrutinizing the opposite shore as well as the one they were on. Occasionally they shouted; first at rare intervals, then more frequently as they advanced farther along the creek.

At the expiration of an hour and a half they had traveled three or four miles, and rounded a couple of large bends without getting any response to their calls, or finding the least trace of the missing boys.

Then a precipitous hill blocked the way, extending a considerable distance along the creek, and leading

sheer to the water from a variable height of forty to sixty feet.

"No use in going around it, Ned. We'll follow the crest so we can watch the opposite shore."

They easily gained the summit, and found a sort of open path between the edge of the thick pine forest and the verge of the cliff. It was half a dozen feet wide and had quite a downward slope. There was quite an element of danger connected with the ascent, since it was slippery with a coating of pine needles. The boys did not think of this, however. Of course they kept close to the trees, but as their gaze was fixed on the opposite shore, which was in plain view far below them, they could not pick out their footing as carefully as they should have done.

Pine needles are treacherous things, even on level ground, and when Clay happened to step on a particularly thick bunch his foot slipped and he was thrown quickly on his side. Before he could realize his danger he slid to the verge of the precipice — where there was nothing to stop him — and vanished from sight.

Ned was horror stricken, and had to clutch the nearest tree for support. Half a dozen seconds passed, but the splash that he dreaded to hear did not come. Then he made his way cautiously to a rock that jutted from the cliff half a dozen feet from where Clay had fallen. Ned threw himself flat on his breast and peered down.

Clay was twenty feet below him clinging to a bunch of stout bushes that grew in a crevice of the cliff. His

feet rested on a tiny ledge no more than six inches wide, and below him was a clear drop of thirty feet to the dark surface of the creek.

Ned realized his utter inability to render aid, and his agony found vent in a sharp cry.

Clay turned a white, pitiful face upward.

"You can't help me," he gasped hoarsely. "The bushes are tearing loose. If the water is deep I stand a chance. Try to get —"

His feeble voice was smothered by a sharp ripping noise, and the next instant he plunged downward, attended by a shower of dirt and stones.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT CLAY SHOT

We must now take the reader back to the previous morning, and see what befell Randy and Nugget after their companions had started for West Hill. Nugget amused himself until dinner time by fishing at the mouth of the run, and caught a number of sunfish and chubs.

When he returned Randy had just finished entering the events of the cruise in the log book. Then they started in to get dinner, and Randy proved himself no novice in culinary affairs by frying a delicious panful of fish and boiling some excellent coffee.

The distasteful work of washing the dishes was duly performed, and then they began to consider what they should do next. Randy wanted to go away up the stream for trout, but Nugget was unwilling to trust himself in the woods after his experience of the previous evening, and was equally determined not to remain alone in camp.

This obstinate conduct roused Randy's temper, and indications pointed a lively quarrel.

"I never saw such a coward," he exclaimed angrily. "You're a nice fellow to go on a canoe trip, I must say."

"I'm not a coward," returned Nugget hotly. "I'm not afraid of you, anyhow, and if you call me any more names I'll show you something."

Randy laughed scornfully, and was about to make a bitter reply when a trampling noise was heard in the woods behind the tent, followed by a violent agitation of the bushes. A few seconds later a big brindle cow appeared on the scene, followed by a small boy shouting "Hi! hi!" at the top of his voice.

The cow was evidently in no mood to listen to argument; she pranced at the tent with lowered horns, knocked it flat, and trampled with dirty hoofs over the clean canvas.

Then she rushed at Nugget with a vicious bellow, and after pursuing him a few yards in the direction of the creek, she suddenly changed her mind, and charged on Randy and the small boy, who were standing by the edge of the pool. The latter escaped by dodging nimbly to one side, but Randy was not agile enough, and as the cow brushed by him her revolving tail lashed him smartly over the face, and tumbled him into the pool.

He emerged dripping wet, and mad as a hornet, just in time to see the cow retreating in the direction she had come, with the small boy in pursuit.

"Look here," cried Randy, "what do you mean by letting a vicious animal like that run loose? Look at

that tent, and look at the condition I'm in. For half a cent I'd get my gun and shoot the brute."

The boy stopped at the edge of the bushes and looked back. He was quite a little fellow, with sunburned legs and face.

"That cow has more right here than you-uns," he said sullenly. "My uncle Dan owns this land. He knows you-uns are here, and he's comin' down pretty soon, too. He says you-uns will be sorry you shot that calf afore he gits done with you."

Randy stared at the lad in amazement, and then a sudden light broke on his mind.

"That explains the bear story," he muttered, and then added to Nugget, who had just ventured to come forward: "You fellows have got us in a pretty mess. It was a calf that Clay shot last night. I'm glad it's not my fault this time."

"A calf!" exclaimed Nugget. "I don't see how it can be possible. It had shiny eyes."

"The calf was shot, anyhow," said the boy. "It got astray yesterday afternoon, and our hired man found it this morning. It ain't hurt very bad, an Uncle Dan thinks it'll get well. That's the reason the cow is so cross, 'cause she can't have the calf with her. She broke the fence down this morning an' got into the woods. I'll have a hard time gittin' her home again."

"You say your uncle is cross about the calf?" asked Randy.

"He's hoppin' mad," said the boy. "He's going to

give you all a lickin', an' then hev you locked up for trespassin'."

"But suppose we explain to him that it was all a mistake, and offer to pay the damages," continued Randy, "wouldn't that satisfy him?"

The boy shook his head.

"Uncle Dan ain't that kind. When he gets mad nobody kin stop him. I reckon he'll lick you chaps pretty hard."

"I reckon he won't," said Randy, decisively. "Not if we know ourselves. Pitch in and help, Nugget; we must light out of this as quick as possible."

Nugget was only too willing to lend his aid, and the tent was speedily rolled up, and deposited in the cockpit of the Pioneer, where it belonged.

"Uncle Dan may be here any minute," said the boy. "You-uns had better wait."

"Say, you'd like to see us licked, wouldn't you?" inquired Randy. "I'm sorry we can't oblige you by staying. Here is a dollar for your uncle to square up the damage to the calf. Just say to him that it was a mistake, and that he needn't come after us, because we are going straight through to Harrisburg."

The lad pocketed the money, and after looking on for a little while in silence he went away to hunt the refractory cow.

The boys worked with feverish energy — not forgetting to keep a sharp eye on the woods — and in scarcely more time than it takes to tell everything was in the canoes.

"It goes hard to leave here," said Randy, "but it can't be helped. It would be a nice ending to the canoe trip if we got locked up for trespassing. I hope the dollar will satisfy that man."

"What are we going to do about Ned and Clay?" asked Nugget.

"I'll attend to that," replied Randy, as he stepped into the Water Sprite and tied its stern to the bow of the Pioneer.

The other two canoes were arranged in the same way, and then the boys paddled quickly out of the stream.

They first crossed to the other side of the creek, where Randy wrote a short explanatory note for Ned and Clay, instructing them to follow the creek down about three or four miles.

"It won't be safe for us to stop short of that distance," he remarked as he pinned the big white document to a tree at the base of the hill.

"The boys can't miss this when they come down to the water. They ought to be here in about two hours."

Having arranged their means of communication, Randy climbed back into the canoe, and led the way down stream. Progress was necessarily tedious, since the current was sluggish, and each had an additional canoe in tow. They felt more at ease when they had passed round the first bend, and after paddling for two or three miles — as nearly as could be judged — they began to search for a good camping place.

They did not find one that suited their requirements for some time, but finally, while drifting along the base of a precipitous cliff, they came to a good sized cleft or hollow. It was half a dozen yards wide. It sloped gradually upward, narrowing as it went, until it terminated in a ravine which seemed to continue on to the top of the hill.

The beach was hard and stony ground, with a few stunted bushes, but there was ample room for a tent, and moreover on each side was a sheer wall of rock towering forty feet in the air.

The boys landed, and with much difficulty dragged the canoes out of the water.

"This place just suits us," said Randy. "There is no danger of the farmer finding us here, if we *are* on his side of the creek. And we need not be afraid to keep a fire going, because these rocks will shut out the light."

It was now half past four o'clock, and when the tent had been pitched — a difficult piece of work for two persons — and the canoes unloaded, the boys began to prepare a good supper in readiness for Ned and Clay.

Six o'clock came, and then seven, but the anxiously expected ones did not appear on the other side of the creek.

Randy and Nugget were too hungry to wait any longer, so they ate their supper by twilight. When it grew a little darker they built a roaring fire at the edge of the water. There was an abundance of driftwood

farther up the slope, which had been left there at various times by the high water.

When nine o'clock came the boys were seriously alarmed, and all sorts of dreadful possibilities occurred to them. They found it impossible to sleep, and all through the long hours of that night they sat about the fire, constantly piling on wood, and keeping a huge blaze going to guide the missing ones to the camp.

The first glimmer of dawn found them worn out by sleeplessness and despair. It was impossible to maintain their vigil any longer, so they stuck the pennant in the sand close to the edge of the water, and crawling into the tent, went to sleep side by side.

A cannon shot could hardly have wakened them then. The sun rose higher and higher until its direct rays beat fiercely down upon the tent from a cloudless sky above, but still they slumbered on.

The heat finally became intolerable, and Randy turned drowsily over and opened his eyes. As he sat up with an effort, struggling to clear his mind, he heard a tremendous splash, and then a loud, shrill cry.

He was thoroughly awake now, and jerking Nugget to an upright position, he turned and ran out of the tent. He gained the shore and looked up stream.

A thick mass of bushes was drifting leisurely along the base of the cliff a dozen feet above, and something behind it — as yet invisible — was making a great commotion in the water.

Then a head appeared, and a pair of struggling

arms, and to his joy and amazement Randy recognized Clay. The lad's strength barely sufficed to reach the shore, and Randy helped him out on land just as Nugget came running from the tent.

Clay staggered up the slope and dropped down in the bushes.

"I fell off the cliff," he stammered with chattering teeth. "Ned is up there; call to him."

Randy and Nugget shouted with all their might, and a reply was heard instantly. Then Ned appeared far up on the cliff and waved his hand. He vanished at once, and a moment later came impetuously down the ravine, leaping rocks and bushes in his haste.

His face was paler than the boys had ever seen it, and tears stood in his eyes. He hurriedly clasped hands with Randy and Nugget, and approached Clay.

"Are you hurt, old fellow?" he asked huskily. "That was a wonderful escape. I thought it was all up with you."

Clay smiled faintly.

"I'll be all right in a little while. I'm suffering from the shock, that's all. I don't think there is a bruise on me."

A fire was quickly made, while Ned explained to his companions the catastrophe that had happened on the cliff. Then Clay was stripped and rubbed down with a coarse towel, and after his dry clothes were on he declared he felt as well as ever.

A good dinner was prepared, and when all were seated around the flat rock that served for a table, Ned

produced the packet of letters and gave a minute account of the wanderings and adventures which it had cost to obtain them. The story of Randy's cake provoked much laughter, and Randy assured Ned that he had done the proper thing under the circumstances.

Then the other side of the story was told, and listened to with even greater interest. Clay was chaffed unmercifully about the calf, and Nugget also came in for a goodly share of ridicule.

The failure of the boys to find Randy's letter was a mystery at first, but Ned finally suggested that it had been blown into the water, which was no doubt the case.

CHAPTER XIV

CAUGHT IN THE WHIRLPOOL

About three o'clock the boys broke camp. They were now thoroughly rested, and eager to be on the water again. Moreover the cleft among the rocks — though admirably adapted for a hiding place — had none of the qualifications which a good camping site should possess.

A paddle of two miles brought the party to Tanner's Dam, and when they had carried the canoes around and embarked on the lower side they passed the mouth of the real Otter Run. This enabled Ned to fix their bearings definitely on the map, and he resolved to keep close track of the topography of the creek in the future.

About six o'clock a beautiful place to camp was found on the left shore of the creek; shade was abundant, and the soil was level and grassy. A few yards up the beach a spring bubbled and spurted from a nest of rocks.

As the boys landed a flock of wild ducks flew up with a great splashing, and winged their way down the creek. Along the opposite shore, which was flat and marshy, yellow-legged snipe were running to and fro, and a couple of gray herons standing contentedly on

one leg, were gobbling minnows from the shallow pools.

This was now Thursday evening. It would be a week on the morrow since the Jolly Rovers had started on their cruise. They were so pleased with the location of the camp, and the opportunities it seemed to offer that they concluded to remain for a while, and here they spent Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

The keen and peaceful enjoyments of those four days were in vivid contrast to the turbulent, adventurous life the boys had led during the past week. They looked back upon it afterward as the brightest period of their cruise.

Sunday was spent quietly in camp, but the remainder of the time was filled up with all sorts of occupations. Randy shot numerous snipe and woodcock. Clay and Nugget gave their attention to fishing, and caught altogether some thirty or forty large bass — not counting the trout which they snared in a neighboring brook.

Ned found his keenest enjoyment in wandering over the country from farmhouse to farmhouse and bringing back tempting supplies. He was a born forager, and well understood the art of making bargains with the farmers.

The boys lived on the fat of the land, and at very slight cost. The diet of fish and game was constantly varied by green corn, new potatoes, sometimes peaches or melons, and occasionally a plump duck or chicken.

Only on one day did it rain, and this merely served to make the fish bite better.

But each and every one of the Jolly Rovers had the true instinct of the canoeist, and when Monday's sun dropped redly behind the hills they were eager to start afresh on their wanderings. Their arms tingled to grasp the paddle and drive the graceful canoe over the blue water; they longed to explore the great unknown territory that lay in front of them, to seek new camping grounds and new adventures.

At eight o'clock on Tuesday morning the crimson and gold pennant stood stiffly against the breeze as it led the little fleet from the spot where so many happy hours had been spent.

It was a glorious day — a day when all living things should have been happy. So it seemed to the boys as they paddled lazily down mid-channel with the slanting sunbeams on their bronzed and radiant faces.

But the business of life went on just the same around them. The hungry bass with his piratical black fin just cutting the surface, scattered the shoals of minnows, and sadly lessened their numbers. The kingfisher scooped occasionally from his perch to return with a shining morsel, and the gray heron stalked among the pools like a duck on stilts, searching the muddy bottom for tender young frogs.

Back in the forest the crows and the blue jays were waging a bitter squallish conflict, and here and there weary toilers among the yellow grain dropped their scythes to watch the canoes drifting by.

But the problem of life cast no shadow on the Jolly Rovers, and they paddled on contentedly, finding something new to admire every few minutes.

Nugget was more than usually happy that morning. The past few days had taught him the bright side of canoeing, and he fondly hoped to find the future just as smooth and free from snags.

He was dipping his paddle from side to side in a leisurely way when his eyes chanced to rest on the bottom of the cockpit. Right between his knees was a flat little head with two bead-like eyes and a red tongue that darted quickly in and out. Attached to the head was a long gracefully coiled body, mottled like the skin of a brook trout.

The yell that burst from Nugget's lips would have done credit to a Sioux warrior. It scared the snake half out of its wits, and the reptile wriggled under the bottom board.

"Help! Murder! Snakes!" roared Nugget, partly rising and clutching the combing with both hands. "Help me, help me! I'll be bitten. I'll die."

"Where is it?" cried Ned, paddling alongside.

"Stamp on it," shouted Randy. "Throw it out and I'll shoot it."

Nugget only yelled the more and shook the canoe so violently by his antics that it threatened to tip over.

"Be careful," Ned warned him. "You will upset. Paddle to shore and we'll take the snake out for you."

"I can't, I can't," shrieked Nugget. "My paddle fell overboard. There it goes."

Ned and Clay started simultaneously for the drifting paddle, but they had hardly taken a dozen strokes when the snake thrust his head out of a crevice in the bottom boards.

This proved too much for Nugget. Uttering yell after yell he sprang to his feet and tried to climb out on the foredeck of the canoe. The Imp refused to stand such treatment, and tipped over instantly, throwing Nugget head first into the water.

Fortunately the creek was shallow at this point, and after going under a couple of times, and swallowing a quantity of water — owing to his persistent yelling — Nugget gained a foothold without the aid of his friends, and waded shoulder deep for the nearest shore.

Amid all the confusion the snake escaped in some manner from the overturned canoe, and swam rapidly down stream. Ned and Clay went in pursuit, but the reptile was too swift for them, and safely gained a patch of reeds.

The Imp was quickly righted and towed to shore. The contents were little damaged, and Nugget made haste to change his clothes.

"I'd like to know how that snake got in my canoe," he said angrily. "It was a beastly mean trick."

"I don't believe it was a trick at all," exclaimed Ned laughingly. "The snake must have crawled in when the canoe was lying on shore, bottom up. It no doubt thought it had found a nice snug place to live."

"That's the way it happened, of course," said

Randy. "No one would have been mean enough to put it in on purpose."

Clay said nothing, but turned abruptly aside and began to busy himself with his canoe.

The delay was of brief duration, and the Jolly Rovers were soon afloat again. Nugget had stretched his wet clothes across the fore and rear deck of his canoe, so that the sun would quickly dry them.

About noon, while the boys were paddling through a deep and narrow part of the creek, Ned called attention to a bunch of ducks that were feeding in the reeds some distance down the right shore. All eyes were turned in that direction, and consequently no one happened to glance toward the opposite bank.

Clay had fallen a little behind his companions, and was three or four yards to the left of them. He was drifting along with his gaze fixed on the ducks, when all at once his canoe began to twist and oscillate in a most alarming manner.

He turned quickly to see what was the matter, and the first glance sent a chill of fear to his heart. He was on the edge of a violently agitated patch of water that kept moving round and round in constantly narrowing circles until it ended in a funnel shaped aperture that went beneath the surface, and was itself whirling in dizzy revolutions.

Even as he looked his canoe drifted into the second circle, and mounted toward a great rock fifty or sixty feet high that rose straight from the water on the left shore.

Clay realized his situation instantly. He was caught in the whirlpool which some of the farmers had spoken about in a vague manner, as though they doubted its existence. There was no doubt about it now. The whirlpool was a stern reality, and he was fast in its embrace.

Without calling his companions, Clay tried to paddle away from the circling current. But to his horror and consternation the canoe was unmanageable. The violent paddle strokes simply made it swing around on its keel.

Then Clay became terribly frightened, and shouted for help. It was indeed high time. He had already drifted to the base of the rock where the whirlpool terminated, and was now swinging back toward the center of the creek.

The appeal for help — though its meaning was not comprehended at first — brought the other boys to Clay's assistance. That is to say they paddled toward the dangerous spot and were within an ace of getting in the same fix, when Clay frantically warned them back.

"Keep away! keep away!" he shouted. "You must find some other way to help me."

Ned was the first to grasp the situation. During the last few days he had heard more than one tale about this dreaded whirlpool with its merciless undertow, and now it made him sick and faint to see Clay's peril, and yet be unable to devise a way of helping him.

For so it seemed then. It would be simple folly

and madness for the others to trust themselves near the rapacious current; yet how else could help reach the imperiled lad?

The whirlpool was thirty feet in diameter, and while Randy and Nugget were looking on with white, scared faces, and Ned was vainly trying to plan a means of rescue, Clay was slowly drifting around the circle, coming nearer each time to the gurgling funnel in the center — and this in spite of the most strenuous paddling. Each stroke, in fact, only deflected the canoe sideways, as though it had no keel, and increased the risk of upsetting.

None realized the danger more than Clay himself and the horror of those few short minutes — they seemed more like hours — he never forgot.

It was not likely of course that the heavy canoe could be dragged clear under water; the whirlpool was no such gigantic thing as that. But it was absolutely certain that when the canoe reached the funnel shaped aperture in the center it would instantly be overturned, and just as surely Clay would be sucked into the black depths below, and whirled off by the fierce undercurrent with no possible chance of reaching the surface.

This was the awful fate that stared him in the face; and all that while he drifted nearer and nearer the end, crying vainly for help, and beating the frothy water with his paddle.

CHAPTER XV

RANDY'S PROPOSITION

At the moment when Clay's situation seemed most hopeless — and while his horrified companions were looking on with the silence of despair — Nugget leaned forward in his canoe, opened the hatch, and drew out a big ball of cord.

"Ned! Ned!" he shouted eagerly, "can you do anything with this outline? I forgot I had it."

Ned's face flushed with joy, and paddling alongside of Nugget he snatched the cord.

"Follow me to the shore," he cried, "and you too, Randy."

An instant later the three lads were standing on the gravel beach, separated from the whirlpool by no less than sixty or seventy feet.

Ned waved his hand to Clay, and shouted hoarsely: "Fight hard, old fellow! We'll save you in a minute."

Then turning quickly to his companions he demanded: "How long is this line?"

"One hundred and forty feet, answered Nugget. "The man I bought it from said so."

Ned tied the end of it to a ring in the stern of the

Pioneer, and ran down the beach, unrolling the ball as he went. Sixty feet away he stopped and cut the cord, then he hurried back with the remainder in his hand. He tied a short stick to the end of the ball, and throwing both into his canoe scrambled after them.

"Now you fellows keep tight hold of that," he directed, pointing to the cord that lay outstretched on the beach. "Pay it out as I go, and when I give the word pull with all your might."

Randy and Nugget began to understand now, and they allowed the line to trail through their fingers as Ned paddled furiously away, heading for a point a little above the whirlpool.

It was a critical and intensely exciting moment. Clay had divined what Ned intended to do, and with this gleam of hope to animate him, he was fighting desperately to keep away from the gurgling hollow which was slowly sucking him into its embrace.

There was scant time to spare when Ned ceased paddling a few feet above and to the right of the whirlpool, and allowed the canoe to drift down stream broadside. But he was wonderfully cool headed and self-possessed, as, with deft fingers he unwrapped the ball of cord and coiled it between his knees. Then he twisted one end about his left hand, and with the right seized the short, heavy stick.

He was now directly opposite Clay, and measuring the distance with a quick eye, he flung the stick straight out. It rose in the air, dragging the cord gracefully after it, and fell across the combing of Clay's canoe.

Ned uttered a sigh of relief, and Randy and Nugget cheered wildly from the shore.

But the danger was not over yet, though Clay had instantly seized the line. The canoe would upset at once if an attempt were made to drag it broadside out of the whirlpool.

Clay comprehended this, and he was quick witted enough to solve the problem. Though his canoe was now verging on the trough of the whirlpool, he calmly tied the line around one blade of his paddle and pressed this with all his might against the big screw eye that was set in the bow of the canoe.

"All right," he shouted hoarsely.

Ned turned and waved his hand to Randy and Nugget. They understood the signal, and instantly began to haul on the line.

The Pioneer moved slowly toward shore, and the next instant the strain reached Clay. It was concentrated in the right place, too, and after a couple of refractory tugs, as though the whirlpool was loath to surrender its victim, the Neptune headed about and slowly followed the Pioneer.

This was, if possible, a more exciting moment than any that had preceded it. So much depended on the two lines. If either broke disaster would follow.

But the cords did their duty nobly, and soon Clay was beyond the swirling circles. A few seconds later the Pioneer touched shore, and then three willing pairs of hands dragged the Neptune in so forcibly that a great wave rolled before the bow.

The boys had to help Clay out and prop him against a tree; and for nearly five minutes he sat there so white and helpless that they feared he would faint. A drink of water seemed to revive him some, and finally the color came back to his cheeks.

"I'm all right now," he said, as he got up and walked a few steps. "For a little while I felt like keeling over, and no wonder, after what I went through out there."

"It was a close call," asserted Ned. "Nugget didn't remember about that line a minute too soon. The credit of your rescue belongs to him."

"No it doesn't," said Nugget bashfully. "You did the work."

Clay looked from one to the other, and then held out his hand to Nugget.

"It was your outline and your suggestion," he said in a low voice. "You saved my life. Will you forgive me, old fellow? I put that snake in your canoe this morning, and am awfully sorry I did it."

Nugget hesitated an instant. Then he blushingly accepted the proffered hand and said:

"We'll let the matter drop, Clay. I know you won't do anything like that again."

"No, I won't," replied Clay earnestly. "I'm done with practical jokes. It was only a garter snake, though I caught it with a forked stick."

Ned and Randy had been at first inclined to pitch into Clay, but seeing that he was sincerely repentant they wisely concluded to ignore his fault, hoping that

the lesson would really prove beneficial, and cure him of the fondness for playing tricks.

After a light lunch the Jolly Rovers started off again. They were anxious to get as far as possible from the whirlpool. During the early part of the afternoon they paddled and drifted by turns, for Clay was still a little weak from his experience.

Between three and four o'clock a bend of the creek brought into view an old wooden bridge. The piers were mossy and crumbling to ruins, and the roof and pool. At the foot of a ledge of rocks on the left shore sides had been guiltless of paint for many a long year.

Just below the bridge the creek widened to a kind of sat three men holding long fishing poles. Their attention seemed to be given to a fourth man, who was sitting in a boat near by, talking earnestly, and pointing from time to time out on the creek.

A spring was visible a little above the fishermen, and as the boys happened to be thirsty they paddled over to it.

The canoes immediately became objects of interest, and a friendly conversation was started.

The man in the boat stepped out, and picked up Randy's gun.

"That's a purty nice weapon," he observed in a mournful voice. "It ain't unlike the one I lost, only mine was longer, and a leetle bit lighter. It was a muzzle loader, though, and this is one of them new fangled kind."

"How did you lose yours?" inquired Randy.

"It sunk out there," replied the man, pointing toward mid-channel. "I was driftin' along when I seen a muskrat in the reeds on t'other shore. I stood up to reach the gun, an' just as I got holt of it my foot slipped on a wet board, an' down I come. The weapon went overboard, an' that was the end of it. It riles me bad, 'cause that gun belonged to my old daddy."

"When did this happen?" asked Randy.

"'Bout half an hour ago; anyway not much mor'n that."

"But the gun surely isn't lost for good. Why don't you dive after it?"

The man thrust his hands into his pockets and stared blankly at Randy. The three fishermen smiled and nudged each other.

"Why don't you dive after it?" repeated Randy. "If you can tell me the exact location I'll get it for you."

"You will, will you?" exclaimed the man impressively. "Waal, I reckon you'd have a stiff contract. Did you fellows never hear of Rudy's Hole? Thar it lies right in front of you, and there ain't no bottom to it."

"Hold on, Mose Hocker," exclaimed one of the fishermen. "There must be bottom somewheres, of course, but it's mighty far down."

The boys looked at one another incredulously and smiled. The idea of a bottomless hole in the Conodoguinet was ridiculous.

At that moment an old man with bent back and

white hair hobbled down the path from the road above, leaning heavily on his cane, which was his constant companion.

"Good afternoon, Daddy Perkiss," exclaimed Mose Hocker. "I'm glad you come along. I lost my gun out in the Hole a while ago, and this chap here offers to dive arter it. You've lived around these parts nigh onto eighty years. Tell him how fur down he'll have to go to reach that weapon."

"Ho! Ho!" cackled Daddy Perkiss, as he tremblingly sat down on a drift log, "the lad wants to dive in Rudy's Hole, does he? Well, let him try, let him try."

The old man was silent for a moment, and his bleary eyes had a far away expression as though they were looking into the dim past.

"It be sixty years since Jonas Rudy were drowned out here," he mumbled in a shrill voice, "an they ain't found the body to this day. I were away at the time, drivin' a teamster's wagon to Pittsburg, but I mind hearin' the story when I come home. Many a time I've heard tell how they tried to find bottom the next spring after Jonas was drowned.

"Mike Berry, the blacksmith over at Four Corners, brought his anvil, an' the men made the women folks give up their clotheslines. Then they went out on the hole in the old ferryboat, and let down the anvil. There was two hundred feet of line in all, an' when half of it were out the men lost their grip. The rest went like greased lightnin', an' the end got coiled

around Mike Berry's yaller dog, an' took it along. The poor beast never came up again."

Daddy Perkiss paused for sheer want of breath, and looked around to note the effect of his story.

"That yarn was started years ago," whispered Mose Hocker, coming close up to the boys, "an' Daddy has told it so many times that he believes every word. I reckon the most of it's true though. It would take more'n one clothesline to reach bottom out here."

"But has the place never been sounded?" asked Ned. "Have you never tried it yourself?"

Mose Hocker shook his head vigorously. "What would be the use?" he replied. "Nobody doubts it. Why, Rudy's Hole is known an' dreaded for miles around."

Evidently regarding this argument as a clincher he turned aside, and began to talk to Daddy Perkiss.

About this time Randy was doing a good deal of thinking. He had listened with incredulous interest to the old man's narrative, and knowing how prone country folk are to accept any fanciful story — especially a long standing tradition — without ever attempting to verify it, the conviction had forced itself upon his mind that Rudy's Hole was a myth — in other words that its depth was nothing extraordinary.

Randy was a good swimmer, but a far better diver. He was long winded, and his staying qualities under water had always been a source of admiration and envy to his companions.

It now occurred to him, with irresistible fascina-

tion, what a fine thing it would be to recover Mose Hocker's gun, and show these people what a delusion they had been laboring under all their lives.

It took Randy but a short time to make up his mind, and walking over to Mose Hocker, he asked abruptly: "Could you tell me just where your gun fell in?"

"I reckon I could if there was any need of it," was the drawling reply. "I happened to notice my bearings at the time. I was straight down from that rock out there, and straight out from the big button wood tree on yonder shore — right over the deepest part of the Hole."

"All right!" said Randy quietly. "Now if you will lend me your boat for about ten minutes I think I can restore you your gun."

CHAPTER XVI

A SHATTERED DELUSION

THE burst of derisive laughter that greeted his proposition in no way disconcerted Randy. He waited quietly until it was over, and then repeated his request.

"Ho! ho!" cackled Daddy Perkiss; "is the lad tired of livin', or kin he breathe under water like a fish?"

"He's a stout hearted chap," cried Mose Hocker, "and sense his mind's bent on takin' a good long dive I reckon he kin have the boat. There ain't no undercurrent out there as I know of, so he ain't likely to come to harm, and besides I'm mighty anxious to git my gun back."

Here Mr. Hocker winked slyly at Daddy Perkiss and the fishermen.

The old man failed to appreciate the joke.

"It's temptin' Providence," he cried shrilly, pounding his cane on the beach. "If you ever sees that weapon agin, Mose Hocker, I'll give you ten pounds of the best plug terbacker that Bill Smith has in his store."

"That's a bargain," exclaimed Mose. "You fellows can testify to what he said."

Then turning to Randy he added with a laugh, "Don't fail me now, lad. Ten pounds of terbacker ain't picked up every day."

"Just give me a fair show and I'll astonish you all before long," replied Randy, moving toward the boat. "Ned, will you go with me?" he added.

Ned willingly agreed, much to the amazement of Clay and Nugget, who expected him to oppose Randy's project with all his might. The truth of the matter was that Ned, being a sensible fellow, shared Randy's view, and was rather anxious to see the tables turned on the credulous rustics.

He was satisfied from the smooth and sluggish appearance of the water that a dive would not be attended with danger.

In some unaccountable manner the news seemed to have spread through the neighborhood, and when Ned and Randy embarked, the crowd had been augmented by three men and two bare-footed urchins. A wagon containing two farmers had stopped at the entrance of the bridge, and the occupants were tying the horse preparatory to coming down.

Mose Hocker's boat was a large, heavy craft, built on the order of a bateau, and was admirably adapted to Randy's purpose. The boys paddled up stream a little until they were directly below the rock Hocker had designated. Then, while the boat drifted down with a barely perceptible motion, Randy hastily undressed.

"It's a pity we didn't bring a fishing line along,"

observed Ned. "I could ascertain the depth for you in a minute."

"We don't need it," replied Randy. "I was never in better wind than I am now. If there's a bottom at all I'll find it."

The boat was now one hundred feet below the rock, and a stroke or two of Ned's paddle put it in line with the big buttonwood tree on the right shore.

"This is just about the exact spot," said Randy, surveying with a critical eye the rock and then the tree. "Hold the boat steady, Ned. I'll be ready in a second or two."

This was not a difficult task, for the water was as smooth as a mill pond and almost as motionless.

Clay and Nugget had by this time paddled out in their canoes to witness operations, and the little group on the shore were waiting in breathless silence.

Randy was prepared now, and suddenly he mounted the broad stern seat, and stood on the outer edge.

An audible murmur came from the shore, and Daddy Perkiss mumbled shrilly: "They're right over the middle of the Hole."

"Paddle down a little," said Randy in a quiet tone to Clay and Nugget. "You obstruct the view. Still in the right location, are we?" he inquired of Ned.

"Yes, as near as possible," was the reply. "Be careful, old fellow!"

Randy smiled and glanced at the expectant crowd on the shore. Then he drew a long breath, pressed his hands together and dived gracefully into the

cloudy blue water. It was done so quickly and cleverly that no loud splash followed, nor was the boat violently shaken.

As the seconds passed on not the least sound broke the stillness; every eye was fixed on the spot where the lad had disappeared, and every heart was beating tumultuously.

The seconds grew almost to a minute, and still the smooth surface remained unbroken. Ned's hand trembled as he kept the boat in position, and Clay and Nugget exchanged frightened glances.

"I knew it," cried Daddy Perkiss in a cracked voice. "That lad will never be seen again. He's gone down to meet Jonas Rudy."

This ill boding prophecy had scarcely left the old man's lips, when Randy shot into view a few feet to the left of where he had disappeared. Half a dozen strokes brought him to the boat, and with Ned's assistance he scrambled over the side.

His hands were empty.

A burst of laughter came from shore, and Daddy Perkiss cried triumphantly: "Where's the gun, lad? Did you find bottom?"

Randy only waved his hand in reply. He was panting a little for breath, but his face wore a very peculiar smile — a smile that quite baffled the three eager boys.

"What luck?" queried Ned excitedly. "How far down were you? Did you find anything?"

"You will know before long," replied Randy with aggravating calmness. "Keep the boat in the same

place, Ned. One more stroke. There, that's it. Here goes for another."

He quickly mounted the seat again, and drew in his breath.

"Hold on, young fellar," cried Mose Hocker in a loud voice, "Don't risk your life a second time. I kin stand the loss of that terbacker."

Randy laughed, waved his hand, and went under head foremost.

The suspense was now greater than on the previous occasion. Ned began to count, and when the half minute expired his face grew pale.

Thirty-five — forty — three-quarters of a minute! No sign of the reckless diver. Had some undercurrent dragged him far down in those blue depths?

When the forty-ninth second had expired a loud murmur rose from the people on shore, and just a second later it changed to a deafening burst of applause as Randy shot above the surface holding in his right hand — *Mose Hocker's gun.*

His face was fairly purple for want of breath, and he had scarcely enough strength to gain the side of the boat. He threw the gun over first and then, with Ned's aid, rolled into the bottom, where he lay for a moment, panting for breath.

Cheer after cheer came from shore, and the boys joined in heartily. Randy was all right in a moment, and as Ned paddled across the creek, he hurriedly pulled on his clothes.

When the boat landed by the rocks such a scene

ensued as no pen can describe. The men crowded about Randy with eager congratulations, and fairly pumped his arms off.

Mose Hocker snatched the gun and waved it triumphantly before Daddy Perkiss.

"What do you think of that?" he cried. "The lad brought it clean up from the bottom of Rudy's hole. I'll take that ten pounds of terbacker, Daddy, as soon as you please."

"Shoo, now! thar's some trick about the thing," mumbled the old man petulantly. "You can't make me believe that Rudy's Hole ain't two or three hundred feet deep."

"But here's the gun to prove it," said Mose, "an' we all saw the lad bring it up. Let him speak for himself, and say whether he touched bottom or not."

"Of course I touched bottom," returned Randy with a slight shiver at the recollection. "It was the biggest dive I ever made. The water must be fifteen or twenty feet deep. It's not any more than that, though. I thought I'd never come to the top the second time. I was just ready to burst when I found the gun, and the weight of it kept me from coming up rapidly."

Daddy heard the lad through, and then, with a contemptuous sniff, he rose and hobbled up the path.

"Don't forgit the terbacker," Mose Hocker shouted after him.

The old man made no reply, and was soon out of sight.

"It's a hard blow for Daddy," said one of the fishermen, "an' the same in fact fur all of us, I reckon. I've been brung up from a lad in the full belief that Rudy's Hole were well nigh bottomless."

"And I," "and I," cried half a dozen voices.

"It will be most amazin' news to the whole community," said Mose Hocker, "an' mebbe it'll teach folks to investigate things. I'm kinder sorry for Daddy Perkiss. It was his chief delight to tell that story to every stranger what come along, an' now he won't dare to open his lips about Rudy's Hole. When I get the terbacker I'll give you fellows a plug apiece."

Three or four of the men laughed at this, as though they had their doubts on the subject.

"Oh, I'll keep Daddy to his word," resumed Mose. "He kin easily afford it." Then turning to the boys he said abruptly, "I want you boys to come down the creek and spend the night at my place. I'll try to treat you well. The recovery of that gun means a good deal to me, and I want to do what I kin in return."

Several other invitations of a similiar nature were extended to the Jolly Rovers, but they accepted Mose Hocker's without hesitation. A few moments later they paddled down the creek, cheered loudly by the admiring spectators.

CHAPTER XVII

THE STORM BREAKS

THE Jolly Rovers were agreeably surprised when they reached Mose Hocker's "place." Instead of the farmhouse, which they had confidently expected, it proved to be a snug little cabin standing in a dense bit of woods along the creek, and distant from Rudy's Hole about one mile.

Mose was a tall, wiry, middle aged man, with a smooth shaven face.

"I've always been fond of hunting and fishing," he explained to the boys, "an' about two year ago I built this place, an' moved in. It stands on my own land. I have a farm back yonder, but after my wife died I put a tenant on my property. The life didnt' agree with me, somehow or other."

"I reckon I've got a streak of my daddy's wild blood. He was a great hunter in his day, and that's why I prize this gun so much. It was made in London by John Armstrong in 1874 — so that silver plate on the breech says—and if it is old fashioned it kin shoot. You chaps ought to be here in the fall when the ducks and geese are moving—I'd show you some sport."

Mr. Hocker proved himself a delightful host. His cabin was crammed full of curious contrivances for catching fish and trapping game, the various uses of which he took delight in explaining to the boys. He was an adept at cooking — as the bountiful evening meal proved — and he possessed a fund of adventurous stories that made the hours pass quickly until bedtime.

He spread blankets and pillows on the floor for his guests, and after the wearisome events of the day they slept soundly until dawn.

A plunge in the creek was first in order, and then came a warm breakfast. An hour later, with many sincere expressions of regret at parting, the Jolly Rovers resumed their cruise. Mr. Hocker pressed them to stay a couple of days, but they deemed it best to push on, since they were yet many miles from home.

Little did they think as they paddled away from the cabin, that they and their friendly host would meet again under far different circumstances in the near future.

All that day — which was Wednesday — the boys paddled steadily. They camped in the evening at the water works dam, one mile out from Carlisle, and while Clay and Randy prepared supper, Ned and Nugget went to town for mail. Fortunately they visited the express office as well, and found a cake there addressed to Randy. They brought it triumphantly back to camp—a straight road precluded the possi-

bility of losing the way on this occasion—and had a glorious feast before going to bed.

Thursday was a repetition of the previous day. Nothing occurred worthy of special mention. The boys covered ten or fifteen miles in spite of the dams that frequently blocked the way.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, while passing through a lonely and beautiful strip of country, they came upon five tiny islands grouped together in mid channel. The largest was not more than a dozen yards long. All were grassy and shaded by trees, and they made a pretty picture with the water rippling softly through the narrow winding channels that separated them.

As the bushes and timber on both banks of the creek were very dense, the boys chose one of the islands for a camping place — the left hand one of two that lay a little farther down stream than the others. It was two or three feet above the surface of the creek, level and grassy on top, and contained seven or eight good sized trees.

The largest of these — a massive buttonwood — stood at the extreme lower end, and its whitened, far stretching roots had been laid bare by the current that came sweeping down each side, formed a shallow swirling eddy.

Here the boys landed, and seeing that the steepness of the bank would make it a difficult task to carry the canoes up — if indeed there was room to spare above — they tied them in a bunch to the roots of the

tree. Then stripping off their shoes and stockings, they waded about in the shallow water unloading what articles they wanted, and carrying them up on the bank.

The tent was staked in the center of the island, and the boys did not discover, until too late, that the entrance faced up stream.

"Let it go," said Ned. "It's a little unhandy for the canoes, that's all. We must be careful not to trip over the ropes, though."

There was another reason why the tent should have faced the opposite way. It was exposed, in its present position, to any storm that might come up from the west.

But this did not occur to the boys, and very naturally, since the sky was cloudless and the air but moderately warm. It had not been such a day as usually brews July thunderstorms.

After considerable searching, two stones suitable for the fireplace were found in the eddy. There was an utter lack of fuel on the island, so Ned and Randy paddled to shore and loaded their canoes with driftwood.

Two weeks of camp life had now familiarized each lad with the duties that were assigned to him, and by working in unison supper was soon prepared.

The boys lingered over the meal a good while, and it was quite dark when the dishes were washed and put away.

At nine o'clock all were sleeping soundly behind

the tightly drawn tent flaps, and the fire was mingling its red flashes with the moonlight glow on the rippling surface of te creek.

Ten o'clock came — eleven — twelve. Not a breath of air was stirring; a dead, oppressive calm, like the sultriness of noonday, had settled down on land and water. Half an hour later the west was inky black with massed storm clouds and fleecy forerunners of the coming tempest were straying one after another across the moon.

All unconscious of impending danger the boys slept peacefully, nor did they awake until the storm was upon them in all its fury. Dazed and terrified they crouched close together, watching the jagged purple flashes that turned night into noonday, listening to the furious patter of the rain and the crashing of thunder, and shivering where the oozing drops fell in their faces from the saturated canvas.

Streams of water were trickling across the ground, and the tent was tugging, like a thing of life, to free itself from the iron stakes.

Ned groped about until he found the lantern, and with great difficulty he lit it. Nugget was trembling like a leaf, but the others were, so far, more disgusted than frightened. A possible ducking, and the loss of a night's sleep, was the most they dreaded.

But soon the presence of a real and actual danger made itself known. The wind rose to such a point of violence that it was little short of a hurricane. Trees began to go down here and there, and the pas-

sage of the gale through the forest on each shore was like the whirring flight of myriads of quail.

The tent was slightly protected by the timber on the upper point of the island; otherwise it must have yielded to the first onslaught of the storm.

"This is terrible," whispered Ned. "If it grows any worse I'm afraid we will fare badly. The tent is strained to its utmost now."

"Even the iron stakes won't hold it if the wind gets through the flaps," said Randy in a dismal tone.

They were silent for a moment, listening to the increasing fury of the gale.

"Oh! this is awful," wailed Nugget. "The water is running down my neck, and I'm sitting in a big puddle. It's coming in all around me."

"You ought to be thankful you're not sitting in the open air," muttered Clay. "That may be the next thing."

At Ned's suggestion — which, strange to say, had not occurred to any one before — the boys overhauled their clothing bags and put on their rubber coats. Each was provided with one of those useful articles.

As they sat about the flickering flame of the lantern a more furious gust than any that had preceded came shrieking down the creek. In the midst of its passage a great crash was heard, so loud and so near that the very ground seems to tremble.

The boys could not repress a cry of terror. A tree had fallen close by, and they dreaded lest another would crush the tent.

"Gracious! what if that was the big buttonwood!" cried Randy. "Our canoes —"

His agitated face finished the sentence more plainly than words could have done.

Ned rose, pulling his coat close about him, and seized the lantern.

"I must see about that," he said hoarsely. "Stay right here. I will be back in a moment."

Before the others could utter a word of protest, he lifted the rear end of the canvas half a foot, and, with lantern in hand, squirmed through like a snake, leaving the tent in utter darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE MERCY OF THE TEMPEST

THE wind was so violent that Ned dared not stand erect. He crossed on hands and knees the brief stretch that separated the tent from the lower end of the island.

The buttonwood was still standing—much to his relief — and the canoes were so far uninjured, though the gale was knocking them together pretty forcibly.

Bracing himself against the buttonwood, Ned turned the lantern in all directions, and soon discovered the tree which had caused such alarm by its fall. It lay prostrate on the other island, but as a channel barely half a dozen yards wide separated the two, it was not surprising that the crash should have sounded very near.

The storm still raged with unabated fury. The lightning played incessantly over the heavens, and the thunder was continuous.

Ned took advantage of a lull in the wind to start on his return, but he had scarcely left the tree when the lantern slipped from his hand, and was extinguished by the fall. He found it after a short search, and as he could see plainly enough without a light,

he pushed on toward the tent, bending his body forward to escape the cutting rain.

A sudden fierce blast of wind compelled him to crouch close to the ground, and just as he rose a jagged flash of lightning turned the blackness into a purple glare. Ned's eyes happened to be resting on the channel between the two islands, and in that brief instant of light he saw a boat gliding swiftly down the current, cutting gracefully through the great waves that rose to meet it.

On the rear seat, paddle in hand, sat a man. A dark slouch hat, pulled far down, concealed his features. He seemed perfectly at home, and in no wise discomfited by the storm that was raging around him.

As the vivid light faded away Ned ran back to the buttonwood tree, and watched the blurred shape of the boat as it came down the channel. He breathed a sigh of relief when it passed out from the islands and continued on through the gloom, for his first thought had been that some danger menaced the camp.

Why a man should voluntarily expose himself to such a pitiless storm, and at such an hour of the night, was a mystery too deep for Ned's comprehension. It was certain, at all events, that the stranger was abroad for no good purpose.

Either his errand was in no wise connected with the Jolly Rovers, or else he had passed close by the tent without seeing it — even when the flash of lightning made the night as bright as noonday.

Ned waited beside the buttonwood tree until an-

other flash gave him a brief glimpse of the boat far below the island. Then he hurried back to the tent and crawled under the rear end. The boys immediately besieged him with questions, and their anxiety was quickly allayed.

"The canoes are safe," said Ned, as he relighted the lantern. "The tree that fell was on the other island. I don't think the storm can last much longer. I believe the wind is subsiding a little now."

He was about to tell them of the strange boat and its occupant that had passed down the channel, when a terrific blast checked the words on his lips. The tent swayed to and fro, and just at this critical moment one of the front flaps tore free of the strings that held it to the pole.

The gale instantly swept under the canvas, lifted the tent bodily, and whirled it through the air, leaving the amazed boys exposed to the driving rain.

Ned snatched the lantern and ran down the island. The others followed him, and when they reached the buttonwood tree they saw the tent floating limply on the waves twenty feet beyond the canoes.

"We must recover it at all hazards," cried Ned hoarsely. "Our cruise is ruined if we don't. Who will go with me?"

"I will," replied Randy.

"And I," added Clay.

"One is enough," said Ned. "I'll take Randy. If the wind prevents us from getting back don't you fellows be alarmed. Keep out of the rain as much

as possible, and if your clothes get wet put on dry ones."

There was no time to lose, for the tent had drifted into the fierce current below the island, and was already out of sight. There was great danger of its sinking as soon as the canvas became thoroughly soaked.

Hastily untying their canoes from the roots of the tree, Ned and Randy paddled away in the darkness, leaving Clay and Nugget to make the best of their desertion.

It was a bad night to be on the water. The storm was still raging, and the surface of the creek was lashed with great foamy billows. The boys did not find the tent immediately.

In fact the wind and the current together drove them a quarter of a mile down stream before they could control their canoes sufficiently to head them around. And even when they accomplished this they found it out of the question to return. Not one inch could they gain in the teeth of the blast, though they paddled hard and fast.

Fortunately the canoes were empty, and this rendered them safe and buoyant, so that they rose lightly on the crest of every wave. They would surely have swamped had the usual loads been in the hatches.

"We stand a poor show of getting back to the island this night," cried Randy in a loud enough tone for his companion to hear. "I'll be satisfied if we find the tent. Do you think it is still afloat?"

With a half a dozen desperate strokes Ned then brought the Pioneer alongside the Water Sprite.

"I don't know," he replied. "If the tent is still on the surface it must have drifted pretty near by this time. We've been trying to force our way up stream for nearly ten minutes. Keep a sharp lookout on your side, Randy, and I'll do the same on mine."

This was by no means an easy matter. It was difficult to see with any clearness at a distance of ten yards, and though Ned still had the lighted lantern in his cockpit, it was impossible to make use of it and to paddle at the same time.

For a few moments longer the boys continued the futile struggle with the wind and current. The rain was still falling in torrents, but their rubber coats kept them fairly dry, and the canvas aprons buttoned tightly over the cockpits, prevented the canoes from filling.

At last, when both lads were quite in despair, a flash of lightning revealed the tent a few yards to the left, rising and falling with the waves.

When the difficult operation of turning the canoes down stream was safely performed, the tent was some yards away. It was still dimly visible and the boys soon caught up with it.

It threatened at first to be a sort of white elephant on their hands, for the three poles were still in position, and the canvas was hopelessly tangled about them.

Had the boys been in a boat their task would have

been comparatively easy. As it was they had to be very cautious for fear of upsetting.

Finally, by getting the unwieldy mass between them and employing their paddles instead of hands they succeeded in dragging a portion of it upon the fore deck of each canoe. The center still sagged in the water, but it was impossible to make any better arrangement.

"Paddle very carefully now," was Ned's caution. "We will run into shore at the first opportunity, and if the storm abates one of us can go up for Clay and Nugget. The island can't be more than half a mile away."

This project, simple as it sounded, was quite impracticable at the present time. The wind had fallen some, but the waves were still so violent that the only safety for the heavily encumbered canoes lay in keeping parallel with the current. A flank movement toward shore would have brought speedy disaster.

The boys realized this and stuck to mid-channel. The continued speed of the current mystified them considerably, and they were quite at a lost to account for it until Ned raised the lantern, and turned it on the surface of the creek.

"Good gracious!" he cried. "The water is yellow with mud. The creek is rising. No wonder it runs like a mill race. This same storm must have deluged the upper end of the valley before it reached here."

Proof of Ned's assertion was not wanting, for that instant the canoes rustled through the protruding grass of a submerged island.

The water Sprite stuck fast on what was probably the crest, and the Pioneer instantly swung around with the current, shaking off the folds of the tent.

Randy turned sideways to see how his companion was faring, and his fare suddenly blanched.

"Look! look! Ned," he cried in a hoarse, frightened voice. "What is that?"

Randy's alarming cry was called forth by the discovery of a long dusky object that was bearing rapidly down upon the canoes.

The same chilling fear entered the hearts of both lads they watched its noiseless approach. They believed it to be an upturned canoe — a message fraught with tidings of disaster.

CHAPTER XIX

ADRIFT ON A LOG

An instant later the shadowy object assumed the unmistakable form of a huge drift log, and before Ned could realize his peril or deal a single paddle stroke, the current whirled the heavy mass upon him, and the blunt end pounded broadside into the Pioneer. The canoe was bowled over like a tenpin, and Ned went head first into the yellow flood. He came to the surface a dozen feet below, and when he found he was out of his depth he made a valiant effort to swim up to Randy, who was fighting hard to drive the Water Sprite off the island, so that he might hasten to his friend's rescue.

Half a dozen strokes convinced Ned of the utter futility of breasting such a current. As he ceased struggling, and allowed himself to drift at will, he saw the log bearing down upon him. It had swung clear around after capsizing the canoe, and was shooting along at a rapid pace, as though to make up for lost time.

With scarcely an instant's deliberation Ned decided what to do. His canoe was floating toward him from

above, but being still broadside to the current, its movements were painfully slow.

Moreover, it offered doubtful security in its inverted position, and was likely to sink if any weight was put upon it.

A few vigorous strokes brought Ned alongside the drifting log as it swung past him. He straddled it a little beyond the middle, holding on with both hands.

It sank a little with his weight, causing the front end to tip upwards, but his head and shoulders were clear out of water. Turning cautiously around, he saw to his dismay that Randy was still aground on the island.

"Push off as soon as you can," he shouted. "Overtake my canoe and paddle for the left bank. I'm safe for the present, and will try to reach land."

"All right!" came the reply an instant later. "I'll do my best."

The words had a vague, far away sound, for already the distance had widened considerably. The log went swiftly on its course, heading straight through midchannel, and leaping and plunging in the turbid water.

Ned clung to it with might and main. He was not a little worried by his strange and perilous position. The yellow flood stretching on all sides of him was a terrifying sight.

The thunder and lightning had almost entirely ceased, and the wind had fallen, leaving the creek as smooth as a millpond; but the rain still poured with a steady persistency that threatened a long continuance.

Ned did not mind this much. The air and the water were both warm, and he felt fairly comfortable.

He was more concerned for his companions than for himself. It would be a difficult matter, he reflected, for Randy to manage the two canoes and the tent.

He wondered how Clay and Nugget were faring — whether they still remained on the island, or had ventured to embark in search of their companions, now that the violence of the storm was past.

Meanwhile Ned was not oblivious to his own danger. While these things were passing through his mind, he was striving to guide the log toward shore by paddling with his left hand and leg. At first he seemed to make no progress.

The current was running swift, and the log remained obstinately in mid-channel. The flood was rising, too. Plain proof of it was seen in the *débris* that floated on all sides — patches of grass and bushes, broken limbs, and here and there a fence rail.

The sky was still overcast with dark clouds, and the gloom behind him showed Ned no trace of Randy or the canoes. He worked harder and harder to gain the shore, and finally he discovered to his great delight that he was getting the log under control.

It steadily pursued a diagonal course, veering constantly nearer to the left shore. Occasionally a swirl of the current pitched it toward mid-stream, but a little perseverance put it right again.

The scene of Ned's capsize was now a good mile in the rear, and he was satisfied that he would reach the

bank in a short time —unless some unforseen event occurred.

This was exactly what destiny had in store for the lad. A moment later a sharp bend — unseen until too late — cast the log in the very center of the creek, and while the sting of this misfortune was still fresh, Ned heard a dull booming noise—the certain herald of either rapids or a dam. The sound, though not loud, came from no great distance.

Its subdued tone showed that if rapids were ahead, they were not very bad ones; if a dam, that it could not be high, else the falling water would make a greater noise.

But Ned had no desire to tempt his fate in either. With what strength was left in his numbed limbs he tried hard to drive the log shoreward.

Had a little more time been granted him he might have succeeded, but the ruthless current swept him on with unceasing speed, and when the log was still fifty feet from the left bank he saw the smooth stretch of water before him merge into a seething line of turbulent waves and tawny foam.

The rude outline of a mill suddenly appeared on the left, proving conclusively the existence of a dam.

All hope of reaching the shore was gone now. It was some slight consolation to know that the dam was not a high one, and Ned boldly faced the ordeal by swinging the log around until it pointed straight to the line of foam. Then he hugged it closely to him and waited.

The suspense was brief. One swift rush to the brink, a quick slide down a glistening slant of water — and then a headlong plunge into the seething waves.

The log rushed on nobly, now under the billows, now high on their crest until it struck a rock endwise, and turned broadside in the twinkling of an eye. Ned parted company with it then and there — he couldn't help it — and struggled on alone. He was in comparatively shallow water now, and though the force of the current and the waves was terrific, he finally gained a foothold on the slippery rocks, and waded waist deep toward shore.

The water soon shallowed, and with a grateful heart he staggered out on a stony beach.

He sat down for a moment to recover from his exertions, and then went up the slope to the building, which was only a few yards away. It proved to be a saw mill, and even in the somber gloom Ned could see that it was very ancient and rickety, and had probably not been in use for many years.

The locality was a wild and lonely one. Steep wooded hills lay on both sides of the creek.

Further investigation showed Ned that the saw mill abutted on the corner of the dam, and that a narrow sluiceway conducted the water to the machinery. He could hear the splash and gurgle of the torrent as it swept under the rotting timbers of the mill and rushed on to freedom through the wasteway beyond.

As the depth of the latter was uncertain Ned crossed the sluice by a shaky plank that spanned the sides, and

found himself among thick bushes at the foot of a steep hill. He was tempted to go back and seek shelter in the mill, for his limbs ached with weariness, and his wet clothes chilled him at every step.

But first it was important that Randy should be found, so he pushed along the edge of the creek in the rain until he obtained an open view of the channel for some distance ahead.

The first glimpse rewarded him for his pains. He spied a bulky dark object about fifty yards up stream. It was approaching at a rapid pace and hugging the shore closely.

Ned put two fingers in his mouth and emitted a shrill, piercing whistle. It was answered in a similar manner, and a moment later the dark mass resolved itself into Randy, the tent, and the two canoes.

"By jove, I'm glad to see you," exclaimed Randy in husky tones, as Ned helped him to land. "I thought you were a goner this time, old fellow."

Ned hastily related his experience.

"It was a close shave," he concluded; "too close to be pleasant. But how did you manage to get here with this heavy load?"

Randy laughed. "I had a time of it, I can tell you. I jumped out in the water — it was only knee deep on that island — and dragged the whole tent on the foredeck of my canoe. Then I paddled after the Pioneer, and caught up with it near another submerged bar, where both the canoes stuck again.

"This gave me a chance to right the Pioneer and

throw most of the water out of it. Then I slung the tent across both of them, tied the cockpits together, and started off. Of course I could only paddle on the right side, but I got along fairly well. The best of it is that I found your paddle on the way down. The lantern is gone, but I have a candle here, if we need it. It was in the pocket of my rubber coat."

"That's exactly what we *do* need," replied Ned. "It will help us to find some dry wood in the mill. But first of all we must drag the canoes and the tent on shore."

This proved a difficult task, but it was finally accomplished. The canoes were turned bottom up, and the tent was stretched over a clump of bushes. Then Ned led the way down stream to the saw mill.

CHAPTER XX

MR. DUDE MOXLEY

When the boys reached the corner of the dam Ned produced his waterproof match box and lighted the candle. This enabled them to cross the sluiceway in safety, and after noting with some alarm that the creek was still coming up rapidly, they entered the saw mill at the upper end, where the floor was level with the breast work of the dam — or rather a few feet above it.

The lower end was twelve or fifteen feet higher than the wasteway, and was supported by an open network of huge beams.

With the greatest caution the boys scrutinized their surroundings. The first floor contained nothing but *débris* — heaps of sawdust, strips of bark, and a few partially sawed logs. The machinery had all been removed.

There was great danger of falling through into the swirling torrent beneath, for in several places the flooring lacked entire planks, and those that remained were loose and rotten.

The light of the candle revealed a rickety flight of steps in the upper right hand corner, and without hesi-

tation the boys mounted to the second floor. This apartment was in remarkably good condition. Not a drop of rain had penetrated through the roof or sides.

The floor was strewn with sawdust and shavings. A carpenter's bench stood on each side, and in the center was a huge old-fashioned sheet iron stove, with a pipe running straight to the roof. The room was lighted by three windows — one at each end, and one on the side facing the creek.

"This is what I call luck," exclaimed Ned. "A stove ready and waiting for us, and fuel lying about in plenty! We won't have to endure our wet clothes long."

"The owner may object to our taking possession, though," said Randy. "We don't want to get in any more scrapes."

"No one but a crusty old brute would refuse to let us dry ourselves," replied Ned. "And besides, I don't believe the owner lives anywhere within a mile. He probably uses this work room in winter — when there is hardly any farm work to do — and doesn't come near it in summer. The reason I think so is because the tools have all been taken away."

Ned's supposition was probably correct. At all events the boys did not scruple to make a blazing fire in the stove, and very pleasant the warmth felt after their long tussle with the storm.

Ned was soaked through and through in spite of his rubber coat, but Randy was only wet to the middle. They stood as near as possible to the stove, and

so powerful was the heat of the wood fire, that in half an hour their clothes were entirely dry.

It was rather a risky undertaking, but both lads were hardy and vigorous and had no fear of taking cold.

As the fire burnt itself out the pale light of day shone through the windows. Friday morning had dawned.

"Still raining a little," said Ned, "and the sky is cloudy. We must start up the creek without delay now. My mind will feel a good deal easier when I know that Clay and Nugget are safe. They must be feeling pretty wretched if they stayed on the island all night in the rain."

"I don't think they would venture to leave after the directions you gave them," returned Randy. "Unless the island became flooded. I never thought of that before."

Ned walked quickly to the side window and looked out.

"The water is still on the rise," he said gloomily. "It is backing into the wasteway and crawling up the slope toward the mill. You can hardly see anything of the dam. To tell the truth, Randy, I believe the creek is quite high enough to cover that island."

Randy turned pale.

"What has become of the boys then?" he asked. "Could they have passed down the creek while we were drying ourselves?"

"Hardly," said Ned. "You forget the dam. But

pull on your coat and we'll be off. It's not raining enough to hurt us."

Randy hastily obeyed, and after satisfying themselves that the lingering embers of the fire could do no damage, the boys went down the shaking flight of steps to the lower floor. With great care they crossed the rotten planks, and were half way to the door when a burly figure darkened the threshold — a roughly dressed man with a gun on his shoulder and a partially filled grain sack in his hand.

The boys stood still, half frightened, half astonished, but the stranger came quickly forward, lowering his gun as he did so.

"Good morning, my lads," he said in a gruff, mocking voice, "so the storm has driven you to my humble retreat. You are welcome — quite welcome. Make yourselves at home. This is an unexpected honor. I am sorry I was absent when you called."

The boys exchanged startled glances. There was an unpleasant ring to the stranger's voice that boded no good intentions.

"If you own this mill we are much obliged to you for the use of it," said Ned. "We got wet in the storm and came here to dry ourselves. We took the liberty of making a fire in the stove up stairs."

As he spoke he moved toward the door with Randy at his heels.

"Not so fast," muttered the man, pushing the boys forcibly back. "You can stay a while and keep me company. I've taken a fancy to you chaps, and want

to get better acquainted with you. Over there is the portion of this domicile that I occupy at present. It ain't very palatial, but I reckon I can give you a log to sit on."

There was no choice but to obey, and the boys reluctantly crossed the rickety floor to the lower corner of the mill. Here was a great heap of sawdust, and two or three logs. The man sat down on the former — between the boys and the door — and motioned his companions to one of the logs.

It was now fully daylight, and the stranger's position, facing one of the broad windows on the creek side of the mill, gave the boys an opportunity to examine him closely.

He wore a dirty, greasy suit of tweed, patched here and there with different colored cloth. His shoes gaped at the toes, and his coat collar was buttoned tightly about his throat — no doubt in default of a shirt.

His face might have been handsome at one time, but it was now marred and brutalized by a life of dissipation. His nose and cheeks were purple, his eyes bloodshot, and a matted growth of brown hair strayed from beneath a ragged slouch hat.

Little wonder that Ned and Randy cowered fearfully before the gaze of this evil looking ruffian. They knew now that he was a tramp, and never before had they seen a worse specimen.

It suddenly occurred to Ned that this was the same man who had passed the camp in a boat on the previ-

ous night, and the knowledge by no means added to his peace of mind.

Immediately on sitting down the stranger had taken a short black pipe from his pocket, and filled and lighted it. But during the performance of this operation he was not oblivious to the keen scrutiny of his companions.

"I hope you chaps will know me again," he said in a sarcastic tone. "Or were you just admiring my beauty? Dude Moxley is what my friends all call me, because I dress with such taste, and take such good care of my complexion."

Suddenly changing his voice he demanded gruffly, "Where are the other two chaps?"

"Why — why — how did you know there were two more?" exclaimed Ned, thrown off his guard by the question.

Mr. Moxley smiled complacently. "I seen the canoes and the tent up yonder along the shore. As the canoes happened to be empty I judged the rest of the party were on behind somewhere. I just guessed at their bein' two more of you, but it seems I hit it."

This was a very lame explanation, but the boys were too greatly worried to notice its defects.

"I may as well tell him all," thought Ned. "Perhaps he will relent and let us go."

Acting on this impulse he related the occurrences of the previous night, and described the perilous situation of Clay and Nugget on the island.

"Won't you let us go and look for our companions

now?" he asked. "If the island is flooded they are in great danger."

Ned had risen in his eagerness, and now he made a step toward the door.

"Sit down!" thundered Mr. Moxley. "If you lads try to escape I'll put a hole through you."

He lifted the gun and patted it significantly, and that instant Ned recognized the weapon. It was Mose Hocker's property — the identical muzzleloader which Randy had brought up from the depths of Rudy's Hole. Ned could see the silver plate set in the breech, and could partially read the inscription: "John Armstrong, Maker."

Randy was equally quick to recognize the gun. He gave a little gasp of astonishment and looked at Ned.

The agitation of the boys was not observed by the ruffian.

"Just sit still now," he growled. "If you don't you'll be the worse off. You needn't be alarmed about your friends. I reckon they'll be along this way purty soon."

While speaking Mr. Moxley happened to glance toward the upper end of the mill, and through a gaping crevice between the boards he saw something that caused a sudden wave of excitement to spread over his face.

Rising quickly to his feet, he seized both boys in an iron grasp and dragged them several yards across the floor to a big closet that occupied the corner of the

mill. He unbolted the door and shoved his captives roughly inside.

"Don't you dare to whimper," he hissed savagely. "Mind that, my lads. Dude Moxley ain't to be trifled with."

The ruffian slammed the door and bolted it, and the next instant his heavy retreating footsteps shook the rotten floor.

CHAPTER XXI

A MYSTERIOUS WARNING

It is quite unnecessary to give a minute account of how Clay and Nugget spent the night on the island. As the absence of their companions was more and more prolonged they became worried and anxious, and gave but little thought to their own miserable plight.

The rubber coats shielded them from the rain, and by crouching under the trees they avoided the fury of the wind. Nugget faced the situation with remarkable fortitude, and uttered but few complaints.

After the gale subsided, and the thunder and lightning became less frequent, the boys made occasional trips to the buttonwood tree to see how the canoes were faring, and in this way they soon discovered that the creek was rising. So rapidly did the flood advance that on the fifth visit they found the roots of the buttonwood submerged, and the yellow tide within a few inches of the trunk.

At Clay's suggestion the canoes were dragged out on the island, and all the baggage was stowed in the hatches. When the task was completed the canoes were so heavy that the boys could scarcely lift them;

and little wonder, since they held just double their usual load.

The water soon began to trickle over the island, and when it was three or four inches deep, the boys tied the canoes side by side to a large tree, and climbed into their seats. Here they sat, protected by rubber coats and canvas aprons until morning dawned.

The broad yellow expanse of the creek, as it whirled swiftly by the island wlth its burden of *débris* and driftwood, satisfied Clay that the absent ones had found it impossible to paddle back.

"There is no use in waiting here any longer," he said to Nugget. "The boys may have been carried far down the creek, and are probably looking for us at this minute."

"You think they are safe then?" asked Nugget.

"I hope so," replied Clay dubiously. "We'll know to a certainty before long. Hand me your knife till I cut the ropes. I tied them in a knot."

"Here you are."

An instant later the canoes drifted off the island, and plunged into the swirling flood. Their heavy loads caused them to sink almost to the gunwales, and this the boys noted with serious alarm.

"We must keep along shore," said Clay. "If we upset then the danger won't be so great."

With extreme caution the boys paddled diagonally to the left bank, where they found the current considerably less rapid. They were drifting along side by side when a man suddenly appeared from behind a

tree a few yards ahead, and beckoned them anxiously with his finger.

"Come in here a minute, you fellows," he whispered hoarsely, when the canoes were close to him.

The boys ceased paddling, but hesitated to obey.

"I don't mean any harm," added the man. "It's for your own good."

"I wonder what he wants," said Clay. "Perhaps it's something about the boys. Let's talk to him, Nugget."

They ran the canoes into a shallow inlet where dry land had been but a few hours before, and the stranger came quickly toward them. His appearance was not calculated to cause the boys any alarm.

He looked to be about six and twenty. He was poorly dressed, and his rather boyish face was covered with a stubbly growth of light hair. Something in his features seemed to wake a chord of recognition in Clay's heart, and he struggled with his memory to account for it.

The man came close to the canoes, and after casting a furtive glance up and down the shore, said in a low voice:

"You needn't get out. I won't keep you long. Where are the other two chaps that belong to your party?"

This unexpected question amazed the boys, and they regarded the stranger with sudden suspicion.

"I don't mean any harm to you, indeed I don't," he added. "It's just the other way."

There was unmistakable sincerity in his words and manner, and after a brief deliberation Clay told him how the other boys had started after the tent, and had not come back.

"I thought you wanted to tell us something about them," he concluded. "Did you just some up tne creek?"

"Yes," replied the man. "I was as far down as the next dam, but I didn't see a sign of your friends. I reckon they're below that somewheres, so you'd better push on and find them. I want to give you chaps a warning. Keep your eyes open for a big man with a purple face. If you run across him get out of the way as quick as you kin. He's somewhere about this neighborhood, too, for I seen his—"

The man stopped abruptly, and after another cautious survey of the woods, resumed in a whisper:

"If you fellows do chance to get in trouble through this party, why mebbe I'll be near at hand to help. It ain't certain, mind, because he may easily give me the slip again. If I kin find him afore he gets away this time, it ain't likely he will give you any trouble."

"I don't quite understand," said Clay in a perplexed tone. "Who are you, and who is this man that you are warning us about? Why should we be afraid of him?"

The stranger shook his head.

"It ain't quite the thing for me to tell," he said slowly. "You see nothin' may come of it after all. Just you fellows mind what I say, and keep your eyes

open. When you find your friends paddle on down the creek for a good way before you camp. Good-by, I'm off."

He turned abruptly away, and hurried through the woods toward the base of the hill.

Clay called him two or three times, but in vain. He was already out of sight.

The boys looked at each other for a moment with unspeakable amazement.

"It's the queerest thing I ever heard of," exclaimed Clay. "I don't pretend to understand it. The man was serious in all he said, too."

"There was something familiar about his face," observed Nugget. "At least I thought so when I first saw him."

"Why, that's just what struck me," replied Clay eagerly. "I never saw *him* before, but I have seen some one that looks like him."

"That's about the way of it," assented Nugget. "We'll keep a sharp lookout for that purple faced man, anyhow."

"We certainly will," replied Clay. "Now then, let's be off. The fellow won't return again."

They backed out of the inlet and paddled on down the creek. Hardly a word was spoken. The mysterious stranger's warning had taken a deep hold upon both lads, and they were so deeply engrossed in puzzling over it that they failed to see the dam until it was close to them. The falling water made but little noise since the breastwork was almost submerged.

It was a weird and lonely scene that the boys gazed upon now — the broad yellow flood under a leaden sky, the gray crumbling mill looming through a pall of drizzling rain, and beyond, where the mists deepened, the foaming thread of the creek, visible for a brief stretch before it was lost among the steep, pine clad hills.

"What a desolate place!" exclaimed Clay. "I don't believe there is a human being within a mile. The boys must be farther down, and ten to one they shot the dam in the dark. It doesn't look very dangerous, but I hardly think we'll risk it, Nugget. That corner by the mill seems a likely place to carry around."

"So it does," assented Nugget. "Come ahead, we'll try it."

With cautious strokes they paddled on until a sudden glimpse of the sluiceway leading under the mill caused them to pull up short. They headed straight for shore, and as they scrambled out at the foot of the hill, and pushed through the bushes, intending to see what the chances were for a portage, they blundered into the two missing canoes and the tent.

"Here's luck!" cried Clay. "Ned and Randy must be —"

The sentence was never finished, for that instant the bushes rustled, parted, and a big burly man with a purplish red face stepped out.

The blank amazement and fear on the faces of the two lads was a study for an artist. Before them was

the living verification of the mysterious warning. There was no mistaking that ruddy countenance.

The stranger spoke first.

"You're just the lads I'm looking for. Your friends are lying in yonder mill. They went over the dam in their canoes this morning at daybreak.

"I happened to see them and saved their lives. They were pretty near drowned, but I managed to bring them around all right. They ain't able to walk yet, so they asked me to go up the creek and hunt you fellows. Come right along and I'll take you to them."

Was Mr. Dude Moxley's brain muddled that he should have inserted such a gross error in his otherwise plausible little story? Perhaps he did not have time to plan it thoroughly in his hasty advance from the mill, or had calculated on finding his new victims at any other place than this.

Frightened as the boys were they noted the discrepancy, and it opened their eyes to the seriousness of the situation. "If our friends went over the dam this morning," asked Clay with a touch of scorn, pointing to the canoes and the tent, "how do these come to be here?"

CHAPTER XXII

AN INSOLENT DEMAND

A DANGEROUS glitter in the man's eyes showed that Clay's question was not at all to his liking.

"How them canoes got here is none of your business," he answered emphatically, "and I don't want no argument about it. Step lively now in the direction of that mill."

The mask was off, and the boys realized that they were prisoners. Their captor's sullen features and the gun that he bore on his shoulder forbade any attempt at escape.

With sinking hearts they trudged along the shore a few feet in advance of the ruffian. They had no doubt that their companions were confined in the mill, and it was some consolation to know they were going to join them. Why they had been captured at all, and what object was to be gained by it was a mystery too deep for comprehension.

From time to time the tramp uttered a brief order, and in this way he drove the boys before him, across the sluiceway, and then over the rickety floor of the mill to the lower corner. He unbolted the closet door and shoved them roughly in.

It was not by any means a joyful reunion for the Jolly Rovers, but they were very glad to be together again nevertheless. A crevice in the door admitted some light to the closet, and at the same time afforded a view of Mr. Moxley, who was then sitting on the sawdust heap, examining the contents of his grain bag.

He drew out two dead chickens, half a dozen ears of corn, and a quantity of apples and pears — a sure proof that he had secretly been plundering some farmer. He began to munch one of the apples, and the boys took advantage of the opportunity to narrate their adventures in low, whispered tones.

When all had been told the mystery was no nearer solution than before — in fact it was even more complex.

"I can't imagine why this fellow has gone to such trouble and risk to capture us all," said Ned. "I hardly think he will do any harm. We must wait patiently and see what happens."

"I can't understand that warning Nugget and I received," added Clay. "I hope the man will keep his word and help us out of this scrape."

"I wouldn't count on that," replied Ned; "and yet there may be more in it than we suppose."

"Hush!" whispered Randy with his eyes to the crevice. "Here comes the tramp."

Moxley rose and approached the closet. He partially opened the door, and then walked back a few paces behind one of the logs.

"Now step out, you chaps," he commanded sternly. "I have a little business to attend to, and I want it done quietly."

The boys tremblingly obeyed, and when they were grouped before the door the ruffian added, "Now go through your pockets and lay everything you have on this log. See that you don't keep anything back."

It was hard to submit to this audacious robbery, but there was no alternative. Moxley had the gun in his hands.

The boys deposited all they had about them on the log — watches, money, keys, fishing tackle, and handkerchiefs. The fellow made them turn every pocket inside out, and when he was satisfied that all were empty he appropriated the money, watches, and keys. The other articles he contemptuously rejected, and allowed the boys to take them back.

Then he drove his prisoners into the closet and bolted the door — much to their surprise and consternation, for they had confidently expected to be turned loose.

"No racket now," he growled. "I ain't going so far away but what I kin hear you. It won't do to yell or kick, for the door is too strong to break, and there ain't another living creature within a mile."

He tramped heavily across the floor and left the mill.

The loss of their valuables had made the boys so angry and indignant that they were little inclined to regard the warning. They soon came to the con-

clusion, however, that escape was really impossible.

The door was stoutly built, and rendered still stronger by heavy cross bars. The hinges and the bolts were massive. The combined efforts of all four failed to make any impression, and they soon abandoned the attempt.

"Great Cæsar! I see it all now," exclaimed Ned suddenly. "That scoundrel is going to carry off our canoes, and leave us to get out the best way we can!"

No one doubted that Ned was right. The boys stared at each other in speechless consternation.

It was bad enough to lose their watches and money, but now they were about to be deprived of everything — clothes, canoes, and tent. It meant the sudden termination of the cruise, and an ignominious return home.

"Let's pound and kick with all our might," suggested Clay. "The door can't hold out forever."

Before any one could reply a heavy tread was heard, and looking through the crevice Ned made the startling announcement that the ruffian had returned.

The boys hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry at this piece of news. They feared a greater misfortune than the loss of all their property.

Crowding close to the crevice — which extended upward the length of the door — they peered eagerly into the room. Moxley had not returned empty handed. He had employed his brief absence in rifling the canoes, and was laden with their entire contents, excepting the dishes and the fishing rods.

He deposited his burden on the sawdust and sat down beside it. Very slowly and attentively he ransacked the bags of clothes, the packets of provisions, and the little japanned tin boxes in which the boys kept paper and envelopes, stamps, fishing tackle, and various other articles.

Then he took the empty grain sack and stuffed it with the clothes, and a large portion of the provisions. He appropriated all the stamps he could find, and pushed the tin boxes aside.

Having completed his arrangements he walked over to the closet and opened the door. Then he sat down on a log facing the boys with his gun across his knee.

"I think I have you chaps pretty tight," he said, wrinkling his face into an ugly smile. "I have a very particular engagement about twenty miles from here, and it was my first intention to start away this morning. But seein' as the rain is still coming down I have changed my mind and will give you the pleasure of my company fur a few hours longer.

"The fact is I've taken quite a fancy to you chaps — quite a decided fancy. There's one young gentleman in your party I'm 'specially anxious to see. I've had a cherished memento of him fur the last ten days, and it's quite a load on my mind because I haven't given him anything in return. It keeps me from sleepin' sound at nights."

Here Mr. Moxley threw out his right leg, and turned the trousers up a few inches, revealing half a dozen red scars on his ankle.

"That's the memento I speak of," he said. "It's a purty one, isn't it?"

There was a breathless pause. The boys turned pale before the ferocious glance of the scoundrel. The mystery was clear as daylight now.

Their captor was none other than Bug Batters's desperate companion. From sheer love of revenge he must have been tracking the Jolly Rovers ever since that momentous night nearly two weeks previous.

Moxley gloated over the consternation and the dread that were depicted on the faces of his prisoners. He did not speak for a moment, but gazed at the boys with a cruel smile that was more terrible than a manifestation of anger.

"Well," he said finally, "I reckon you know who I am by this time. I'll give you just five minutes to point out the lad who peppered me with salt. If you're sensible chaps you'll do it without hesitation. If you try to make a fool out of me I'll serve you all the same way I intend to serve him. I'm a fair minded man, and don't want to punish the innocent with the guilty if I kin help it."

The boys looked at one another without speaking. If Randy was a shade paler than the others it escaped the notice of Mr. Moxley, although he was scanning all the faces intently, with a view to picking out the guilty one by his own powers of perception.

"The allotted time is slipping away," he said grimly. "The right party had better speak up quick. Oh! you needn't look out of the windows. No one comes

near this place in the summer, and there ain't a house within three quarters of a mile. I've got you right in my power, and there ain't no hope of escape."

"I hardly think you will get the information you want," said Ned in a firm hut husky voice. "I for one shan't tell you, and I advise my friends to do the same. It's not likely we would put one of our companions in your power after the threats you have made. If you wish to avoid trouble in the future you will be satisfied with robbing us, and will let us go without any worse treatment. As for the shooting — no one was to blame but yourself. You had no business to attack our camp that night."

CHAPTER XXIII

A DARING ATTEMPT

MOXLEY'S face turned a deeper shade of purple, and he made a threatening step toward Ned.

"You're a bold lad," he said with a harsh laugh. "There are not many would dare to speak to me in that way. But it wasn't you who fired the gun that night. I can tell by your actions that you're anxious to screen one of your companions."

He paused a moment and then went on: "You'll find out before long that Dude Moxley ain't to be trifled with. I'll get what I want out of you obstinate pig headed chaps if it takes a week. I know how to bring you to terms. Back you go in that closet now, and there you stay until you can listen to reason. When you hand over the lad I want the rest of you can go free, and so can the other one for that matter — when I'm through with him.

"Perhaps when he finds his companions are suffering for what he did, his conscience will make him confess. But mark you now, if this affair ain't settled by to-morrow's dawn I'll chop up your canoes and burn the tent. I'll do more than that, too. I'll

bind and gag you, and leave you here alone. And not a bite do you get to eat, either."

With this ultimatum Mr. Moxley rose, and bolted the door. Then he sat down on the sawdust, and sorting out some crackers and jerked beef from the provisions began to eat greedily.

He was evidently quite satisfied to spend another night at the mill, for the rain was coming down faster than ever. What he had told the boys about the loneliness and security of the place was no idle boast, else he would have made haste to leave the locality with his plunder.

Meanwhile a very excited discussion was being carried on in whispers behind the closet door.

Randy, stricken with remorse for the troubles in which he had involved his companions, was resolved to admit the shooting.

"I'd sooner stand the punishment than see you fellows starving here," he said. "It will save the canoes and the tent, too. I don't believe the man will dare to harm me. He is only trying to scare us."

"Not a bit of it," replied Ned stoutly. "He's a thoroughbred villain, and will certainly take some revenge on you. Your resolve does you lots of credit, Randy, but it won't do. You might repent it all the days of your life."

Clay and Nugget were of the same mind, and earnestly urged Randy to abandon his rash intention.

"Help may be nearer than we think," said Clay. "The man who stopped us up the creek this morning

was certainly Bug Batters, and it looks very much to me as though he has been following this Moxley on purpose to keep him from doing us any injury. He may feel grateful to us, you know, because we saved his brother — or rather you did, Ned."

"And Bug Batters knew that Moxley was in the vicinity," whispered Nugget. "That's who he was looking for when we met him."

"I have no doubt that the stranger was Bug Batters," said Ned, "and I think he is trying to prevent his old companion from carrying out his revenge, as Clay suggests. But what has become of Bug Batters now? That is the important question. I am afraid he has strayed off in some other direction. If he came near the mill he could not help finding the canoes."

"He told us he had been down the creek just before we met him," remarked Clay, "but he could not have been all the way to the mill, for the two canoes and the tent were there then, and he did not say anything about them."

"And when he left us he struck back toward the base of the hill," added Nugget.

"It looks very much as though he had lost the trail entirely," said Ned. "He may be three or four miles away. It would be very foolish to count on getting help from him, anyhow."

"Then we don't stand a ghost of a chance," muttered Randy. You had better let me have my own way. I'll throw myself on that fellow's mercy."

"You won't do anything of the kind," said Ned

firmly. "We won't let you. If anything serious happened we would have to shoulder the blame. If you are really sorry for being the cause of this scrape, prove it by dropping your foolish project."

"You take things coolly enough," grumbled Randy. "Do you want us to stay cooped up here for a week, and lose everything we have? Go ahead, then. I won't say any more."

In truth Randy was glad enough to give up his resolve. Remorse had prompted him to make the offer, and he had secretly hoped that his companions would refuse to accept the sacrifice.

"I don't intend that we shall stay here a week, or even a night, if I can help it," said Ned, after a pause. "I have a little plan in my head, but it won't work until evening. If that fails we still have a slim chance left.

"The farmer from whom those chickens were stolen may stray down here in search of the thief, and it is not impossible that Mose Hocker is somewhere about here. This man certainly stole that gun from Hocker's cabin, and if he took the boat at the same time — which I believe he did — Hocker will surely try to recover his property, and will naturally look for it along the creek."

Ned's reasoning — and especially his intimation of a plan to escape — put the boys in a more cheerful mood. They were all thoroughly exhausted for want of sleep, but that was of little consequence compared with the pangs of hunger and thirst they were en-

during. They had eaten nothing since the previous evening, nor had a drop of water touched their lips. And it was now past noon.

It was aggravating, nay, maddening, to know that their store of provisions was so close. Well they realized the futility of appealing to their merciless captor.

He had said they should have no food, and they knew he meant it. No doubt he would deny them water also, and they did not venture to ask it.

They could see the fellow plainly. He was sprawled in a lazy attitude on the sawdust, pulling at his foul black pipe. Occasionally he took a flat, greenish bottle from his pocket and tasted the contents with a satisfactory smack of the lips. The fumes of bad tobacco and whisky began to permeate the closet.

So the long afternoon wore on. Moxley seemed quite unconcerned about his prisoners. He was well content to lie on the soft sawdust with his bottle and his pipe, secure from the pelting rain that was falling outside.

Ned kept a close watch upon him, noting with satisfaction that he had frequent recourse to the bottle. His potations would likely induce sleep.

It seemed to the impatient boys that night would never come, but at last the gray light faded from the crevice, and the dusk of evening deepened the shadows in the old mill.

Before it was fairly dark Moxley lighted one of

the lanterns that he had brought from the canoes and put it on a log. It was a bullseye, and he so trained it that the yellow glare shone on the sawdust heap.

Perhaps he fancied it an excellent substitute for sunlight, which all tramps love so dearly. At all events he basked in it while he smoked a couple of pipes, and then, after several ineffectual efforts to sit straight, he rolled over on his back.

A moment later heavy snores came from his parted lips. He was undoubtedly asleep.

It may be imagined with what anxiety Ned had been watching this little scene through the crevice.

"The time has come," he whispered to his companions. "Moxley won't wake in a hurry now. But to make sure, suppose you mount guard there, Randy."

"What are you going to do?" asked Randy, as he crouched down on the floor. "Break the door open?"

"Not much. I'll show you in a moment."

The closet in which the boys were confined was built right against the rear end of the mill. Its dimensions were ample — eight feet long and about four wide. Underneath was the wasteway, but its usual roar was now subdued by an influx of water from the flooded creek.

Ned had been quietly examining the situation during the day, and had noted the shaky condition of the floor planks. He now directed Clay and Nugget to

stand close to the door. Then kneeling down he inserted both hands in a crevice between two of the planks and pulled with all his might.

A ripping noise, a sharp crack — and the worm eaten plank came free of the beams, leaving a gaping orifice in the very center of the floor, four feet long by a foot and a half wide.

Ned trembled like a leaf.

"Is it all right?" he whispered eagerly.

"Yes," replied Randy. "The rascal is sound asleep. He didn't budge."

"I'm glad of that."

The boys looked timidly down the hole, and crouched closer to the wall. Far below, through the network of crossed beams, they could see the eddying flood. It looked immeasurably distant.

"You don't expect us to go down there, I hope," queried Clay.

"No, but I intend you to lower *me* through," answered Ned. "If I can reach one of those rafters I will be all right. It won't be a difficult matter to get out on land. Then I will hurry around to the door, liberate you fellows, while Moxley is sleeping, seize his gun — and then away for freedom.

Ned drew a long breath at the prospect.

"Now this is what I want you to do," he resumed in a calmer tone. "If the rafters are too far below me you must let me down to them by one of your coats. Brace yourselves now so you can stand the strain."

The boys obeyed and Randy stripped off his coat in case it should be needed.

Then Ned lowered himself at one end of the hole, and swung clear down.

He pulled himself up, and clung by his elbows. "No good," he whispered hoarsely. "The nearest rafter is a foot below. Let me have the coat. It will be safer than trusting to your hands. I might drag you down with me."

The three boys braced themselves around the hole, and took a firm grasp of the upper part of the coat.

"All right," whispered Randy.

By a dexterous movement Ned transferred his hold from the planking to the more precarious support and slipped downward, hand over hand. An instant later his feet touched a broad, solid beam.

CHAPTER XXIV

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

THE instant the tension relaxed the boys drew the coat up.

"All right!" came Ned's voice from the darkness. "Put the plank back in place now and keep very quiet. Wait a moment," he added quickly. "Something just occurred to me. I may be right and I may be wrong, but at all events don't you fellows be scared if you hear a big splash."

"We won't," whispered Randy.

Then the plank was dropped noiselessly over the hole.

Ned straddled the rafter — it was too dark to risk an upright position — and made his way to the nearest end, which terminated in one of the walls of masonry that formed the sides of the sluiceway, and on which the mill partially rested. Then he turned around and crept to the other end, where he found the same state of affairs.

His fears were now confirmed. The mill rose fairly from the two stone walls, and there was no way of escaping overhead, even had the other rafters

been within reach. His only chance lay in the flooded waterway underneath.

Ned had more than half expected this, and was therefore prepared for the emergency. Without hesitation he swung from the rafter and dropped through eight feet of space into the turbid flood.

He went clear under, but came to the surface quickly, and swam with vigorous strokes down the wasteway. Both the air and the water were warm, and he felt little discomfort.

Between the reflex current from the creek on top, and the undertow from the sluiceway beneath, he was buffeted about considerably before he succeeded in emerging on the spit of land between the mill and the creek. He squeezed the water from his clothes as well as he could, and started up the slope through the stones and bushes. A misty drizzle of rain was still falling.

He redoubled his caution as he neared the upper end of the mill. Creeping on hands and knees to the door, he peeped cautiously over the threshold. He was hardly prepared for what met his gaze.

He had confidently expected to find Moxley sound asleep, and instead of that the fellow was sitting upright with his gun across his knees, and his bottle in one hand. Perhaps the splash made by Ned's drop into the wasteway had wakened him without arousing his supicions. He had no present intention of going to sleep, for he moved a little closer to the light of the lantern, and filled his pipe.

For a moment Ned felt the disappointment keenly. He knew what a severe blow it must be to his companions. It was out of the question to rescue them now, for Moxley was directly between the door and the closet.

Ned had been so sure of effecting his plan without hindrance, that it had not occurred to him what step to take in case of failure. But a brief consideration of matters raised his spirits, and he resolved to seek the nearest farmhouse and obtain help.

"That is a far better plan anyhow," he reflected with satisfaction. "Moxley will be captured, and we will recover our watches and money. And we won't have to start down this flooded creek in the dark, either. I must be quick, though, for Moxley might happen to open the closet and discover my absence. I wish there was some way of letting the boys know what I am going to do."

This was manifestly impossible, so Ned crawled away from the door and crossed the sluice to the foot of the hill. He could not withstand the temptation to go up the creek and have a look at the canoes.

He found them all safely out of reach of the flood, for Moxley was too shrewd a man to let them go adrift, and perhaps cause an investigation that would frustrate his plans.

As Ned was turning away his eye caught a sudden gleam from the cockpit of Clay's canoe, and on making an investigation he was surprised to find Randy's gun. Moxley must have overlooked it.

The weapon was useless, for the ammunition had been carried off, but Ned shouldered it and started briskly down the creek. At the sluiceway he found a well trodden footpath, and followed it along the rear side of the mill, and thence by the base of the hill to a wagon road which began abruptly at the edge of the wasteway, where there was no doubt a fording to the opposite neck of land.

Ned concluded that the road led to the home of the man who owned the mill, and he was about starting off in haste when his eyes fell on a boat that protruded from a clump of bushes a few yards down the shore.

On going close he recognized it instantly by the peculiar arrangement of the seats. It was Mose Hocker's boat. Moxley had carried it off when he stole the gun.

"I say, young fellow, don't be quick with that shootin' iron; I want to talk to you."

The voice came from a thicket a few feet up the bank, and as Ned stood still with fear and amazement, a man slipped out and stood before him.

Ned instantly guessed the identity of the newcomer.

"You are Bug Batters?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, I'm Bug Batters, and I reckon you are one of them canoein' chaps. I took you fur some one else at first — fur the man what put this boat here."

"You mean Dude Moxley," said Ned. "Well, I can tell you where he is. In spite of your warning

we all fell into his hands, and I'm the only one that's free so far."

He went on with his story and quickly made the situation clear.

Bug was amazed to learn how close his old companion was.

"It's a purty bad fix," he said slowly, "but I reckon we can't get your friends out of it. It's a pity you have no loading fur that gun. You see, Moxley is a bad man and won't listen to argument. We'll have to think over the matter a little bit, and meanwhile I'll tell you how I come to be here."

Both sat down on the boat, and Bug began his narrative.

"I'm a purty rough customer, but I've got a heart like other men, and I'm grateful to you because one of you saved my brother from drowning. Moxley was awful mad when you gave him the slip, but he didn't think of going after you at first. Two or three days later he heard accidentally that you fellows was camping some place along the creek — I furget the name of it now — and knowin' from this that you weren't in any hurry he got into his head to go after you.

"I tried to talk him out of it, but it weren't any use, so then I let on I was agreed to it, meanin' all the time to stand by you fellows. Well, we traveled down the creek fur a couple of days until a rock knocked the bottom out of our boat and sunk it.

Bug hesitated briefly, and then resumed in a falter-

ing voice: "We picked up another boat that night, and started off again, but I reckon Moxley must have suddenly got suspicious of me, for when morning came he gave me the slip and that was the last I seen of him. Knowin' that he meant mischief, and knowin' that you chaps couldn't be far away, I follered the creek on down.

"Before daylight this morning I found the boat here. I went up the creek then lookin' fur Moxley, and that's when I met two of your party and warned them."

"But where have you been all day?" interrupted Ned. "We thought you had gone off in some other direction."

"I'll tell you where I've been," muttered Bug angrily. "I had a streak of hard luck this morning. After I left your fellows I struck over the hill to the nearest farmhouse, thinkin' Moxley might be prowlin' around for something to eat. I reckon he'd been there before me, because the first thing I knew a big ugly farmer and his hired man had me fast. They swore I'd been stealin' chickens an' corn, and wouldn't let me say a word. They penned me up in an outbuilding, intending to lug me to Carlisle jail in the morning. But I broke out about an hour ago, and came straight down here, and when I seen the boat I knew Moxley must be somewhere around yet."

"That *was* hard luck," said Ned, smiling at the recollection. "Moxley had a whole bag of chickens, and corn, and fruit in the mill. The farmer thought

you were the man that stole it. It was awfully kind of you to go to all this trouble and risk on our account. There are not many men who would have done it."

"You saved my brother's life," replied Bug doggedly. "It takes a good deal to square a debt of that kind. There's one thing I'd like to say though. It goes agin the grain to serve an old pal an ill turn — no matter how bad a man he is. I'm willing to get your friends free, an' save your money, and watches, an' everything else, but I ain't goin' to be the means of puttin' Moxley in jail — if I can help it. I'm afraid, for one thing, because he'd hunt me down as soon as he got out."

"Well, I'll leave the whole affair in your hands then," replied Ned. "I was just on my way to the farmhouse when you stopped me. What do you think we had better do? Wait for Moxley to go to sleep again, or try to capture him with this empty gun?"

Before Bug could open his lips to reply a slight noise was heard in the bushes, and three men suddenly appeared on the other side of the boat.

"We have you at last, you scoundrel," cried a harsh voice.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SIEGE BEGINS

THE unexpected appearance of the three strangers stupefied Ned, but Bug turned like a flash and started to run. Two of the men instantly overhauled him and threw him roughly to the ground, while a third hastily opened the slide of a dark lantern that was strapped to his waist and cast a flood of light upon the scene.

Ned uttered a gasp of amazement. The man with the lantern was Mose Hocker.

The recognition was mutual.

"You here!" cried Hocker in a pained voice. "I didn't expect this. Is it possible that you lads came down to my cabin and stole the gun and the boat? I wouldn't have believed it of you without the evidence of my own eyes."

"And this here's the same feller I had locked up in the smoke house," exclaimed one of Bug's captors. "I'll bet he don't steal any more chickens for a while."

Ned stood pale and agitated before his accuser — quite at a loss for words to explain.

"I'm sorry for you," resumed Hocker, "but I

must do my duty an' hand you over to constable Jeffries. Where are the rest of your party?"

The words came with a rush now as Ned eagerly denied his guilt and explained away the incriminating circumstances.

Then, while the others clustered about him, he commenced the story at the beginning, and went through with it thread by thread.

His excitement caused him to speak a little inarticulately; and he missed a few details, but by adroit cross questioning his hearers obtained a clear understanding of the whole situation — starting with the rescue of Bug's brother and ending with the events that had recently transpired at the mill.

Ned was so anxious to procure Bug's release that he quite forgot his suspicions of a few moments before — namely, that Bug was equally guilty with Moxley of the theft of the boat and the gun.

"Won't you let him go?" he pleaded. "It's all a mistake. He had nothing to do with stealing those things from the farmer. He was doing all he could to help us."

But Hocker had formed his own opinion after hearing Ned's story, and so had constable Jeffries and Mr. Zinn, the farmer.

"I'm mighty glad to know you lads ain't guilty," said Hocker, "and I ax your pardon for my wrong suspicion. As for this fellow, I ain't so sure about him. I don't doubt that he's really been trying to get you chaps out of a scrape though, and I promise

you he'll get full credit for it. Meanwhile we'd better make sure of him — just as a matter of form, you know."

He nodded to Jeffries and the latter slipped a pair of bracelets on Bug's wrists.

Ned was surprised and indignant. He saw no reason for such a step.

"Don't be worried, lad," remarked Hocker soothingly. "He may be turned loose later on. You see I can't afford to let the guilty parties escape after the hard chase they've given me. Why, Jeffries and I have been scourin' all along the creek in a buggy. We happened to strike Zinn's farm this evening, and stopped fur information. Zinn told us he had a man locked up in the smoke house, but when we went to look the fellow was gone.

"I suspected it was the party I wanted, an' knowin' that in that case the boat couldn't be far away, we hurried down to the creek. And it's well we did for your sake as well as mine. The next thing is to rescue the lads and capture the rascal. We had better be quick or he will take alarm and leave the mill."

"Moxley is the fellow's name, is it?" said the farmer. "It has a kind of familiar ring to my ears."

"I know the man," spoke up Jeffries. "Dude Moxley he goes by, but that ain't his real name. He comes from a good family up the valley, and was well educated when a lad. Drink ruined him, and now he's one of the greatest scamps unhung. I know this other chap, too," added the constable. "His

folks are sober, respectable people over at the Gap, but he ain't much better than Moxley. We've met more than once before. How is it, my man?"

Bug hung his head but said nothing.

The scene was inexpressibly painful to Ned, and he was greatly relieved when the conversation turned on the rescue of his companions. He little dreamed that the most exciting incidents of this already eventful night were yet to come.

"We had better cross to the neck of land in your boat, Hocker," suggested Zinn. "The plank over that sluiceway makes a lot of racket, and the scoundrel may hear us and slip away."

This happy idea was carried out. The entire party embarked, and landed a moment later about ten yards below the mill. The rain had ceased some time before, and the moon was now peeping through a rift in the scudding clouds.

As the men crept up the stony slope they saw through the gaping crevices of the mill the yellow gleam from Moxley's lantern. Suddenly it vanished, and a creaking noise was hear.

"The rascal is escaping. We must run for it," whispered Hocker. He bounded forward with Jeffries at his heels. Zinn fell behind, leaving Bug in charge.

The men swiftly turned the upper corner of the mill just as the door was slammed and bolted in their faces. Hocker began to kick savagely and wrench the handle.

"That won't do any good," exclaimed Zinn, as he reached the spot. "I made a strong job of that door, and it will take more than a little to break it down. There are plenty of other places that can be forced in."

A brief pause followed, and then a sullen voice issued from behind the door.

"I'll put a hole through the first man that tries to enter this mill. I mean what I say. Dude Moxley ain't to be trifled with."

The men hastily withdrew, first taking the precaution to remove the plank that covered the sluiceway.

"The rascal must have seen us coming up the slope in the moonlight," muttered Hocker. "I suppose he thought we had the place surrounded and every avenue of escape cut off. He's a desperate fellow, and may stand a long siege."

In truth Moxley seemed to be preparing for that very thing. He boldly drew in the shutters of the two windows that the faced the creek, and a moment later he began to roll logs about, evidently fortifying the weak places in the wall.

"That may be only a ruse," said Jeffries. "Is there any way of escape from the other side?"

"Of course there is," exclaimed the farmer. "He can easily drop from the second story window to the foot of the hill. Lend me that empty gun," he added, turning to Ned. "I'll cross the wasteway in the boat and get behind the trees a few yards up the hill.

If the rascal attempts to crawl out the window I'll scare him back."

Ned handed over the gun, and the farmer departed in haste. Hocker and Jeffries moved aside and carried on a whispered conversation.

Bug was left to his own devices. He could not escape, for the removal of the plank from the sluiceway made the place literally an island. He sat down on a big stone, with his manacled hands resting on his knees. Ned was restless and heartsick, and the prolonged suspense grew more intolerable every moment. He was afraid that Moxley would vent his anger on the boys, and perhaps do them an injury.

Hocker divined the lad's thoughts.

"Don't be downhearted," he said. "Your friends are safe enough. The scoundrel won't dare to hurt them. By and by, if the siege threatens to last, we'll find a way to get them out of the mill."

"I hope you will succeed," said Ned. "It's hard to tell what that ruffian will do. And none of us have had anything to eat since last evening at supper time."

Hocker was thunderstruck on hearing this, and hastily produced a double handful of crackers from the capacious pocket of his coat.

"That will take the edge off your hunger," he said. "I bought them at a country store as we drove by this morning. When Zinn's hired man comes down to see where his master is — as he surely will before long — I'll send him back for food. If we can't get

your friends out of the mill we can at least send them something to eat through that loose board. By means of the boat one of us can climb into the rafters."

This plan seemed feasible, and Ned felt no compunctions about eating the crackers. Nothing had ever tasted so good to him before.

Meanwhile Hocker and Jeffries had been quietly holding another consultation, and now the latter advanced to the side of the mill.

"Moxley," he called in a loud voice, "if you know what's best for you, you will quietly hand out that gun, and deliver yourself up. The more trouble you give us, the harder it will be for you in the end. You can't possibly escape, and your capture is only a question of time. We are well armed, and won't stand any fooling. Come out now and we'll make it as easy for you as possible."

There was a brief pause, and then creaking footsteps were heart as Moxley approached the wall.

"You can talk all night," he shouted hoarsely, "but it won't do any good. Don't you come too close, Bill Jeffries, or I might draw a bead on you. We have more than one old score to settle. As for getting me out of here, you and ten like you can't do it. I have plenty of ammunition and plenty to eat, and this place will hold me as long as I want to stay. You can't take me inside of a week. I have four prisoners in here, and not a mouthful of food will they get, not a sup of water, as long as you fellows are prowl-

ing around. I mean what I say, Jeffries, and you know it. For your own good I warn you to get out of this. I'll shoot the first man that enters the mill."

To enforce this hostile declaration Moxley thrust the muzzle of his gun through a crevice, and Jeffries hastily retreated.

CHAPTER XXVI

BUG'S PROPOSITION

THERE was dead silence for a while. It was only too evident that Moxley meant what he said, and though Jeffries and Hocker were brave men, they were reluctant to engage in a struggle with all the odds against them.

Accompanied by Ned and Bug they moved down to the edge of the water — a distance of less than thirty feet in the present condition of the creek — and ensconced themselves in some thick bushes. There was no slight risk that Moxley would shoot through the crevices if the moonlight afforded him a tempting chance.

"If we can wait in patience the game will fall into our hands," said Jeffries. "The rascal has been drinking, and the fiery stuff has given him false courage. After a while he will either fall asleep or become helpless from intoxication."

"I wonder if the boys know that help is outside," remarked Ned, "I wish I could get a few words with them."

"Of course they know it," replied Hocker. "They heard every word that was said, and they have too

much sense to make any outcry. We'll get them out of the scrape before long, never fear."

Just then the farmer's shrill voice rang out distinctly from the hillside behind the mill:

"Keep back, you rascal. If you crawl out that window I'll drop you quick as a wink."

"Moxley is trying to escape from the second floor," muttered Hocker. "Wait a moment. I'll be back right away."

He crept down the shore of the creek, and crossed the slope to the wasteway.

"Is it all right, Zinn?" he called out.

"Yes," came the reply. "The rascal stuck his ugly head out of the winder a moment ago, but I scared him back. He can't escape on this side."

Hocker was about to rejoin his companions when a dark figure came down the road and passed through a strip of moonlight which served to reveal his identity. It was Abner Peck, the farm hand.

In response to a whispered command from Hocker the man jumped into the boat and pulled hastily across the wasteway. Hocker briefly explained the situation, and after a little further conversation Abner recrossed to the main land, while Hocker hurried back to his companions and related what had occurred.

"I sent him up to the house for provisions and a rope," he concluded, "and when he returns we'll try to get the lads out of the closet."

This piece of news cheered Ned considerably, and

helped him to endure the suspense with fortitude. Nearly an hour passed by without a sound from the mill or the alert watcher on the hillside.

The creek was still rising by slow degrees, but the sky was rapidly clearing and gave every promise of continued fair weather.

Finally a low whistle was heard, and Hocker noiselessly disappeared. He returned in less than five minutes, and announced that Abner was waiting with the provisions and the rope.

"Now I have an idea for working this little scheme," he added. "Jeffries, you go to the other end of the mill and open a conversation with Moxley — let on you want to reason with him some more. Keep him talking as long as you can, and meanwhile me and this lad will slip up the wasteway in the boat and try to get the lads free. If anything goes wrong, whistle."

Jeffries was quite satisfied to take the part assigned to him. He moved off in one direction, while Hocker and Ned took the other. Bug was left alone in the bushes.

Jeffries was already in conversation with Moxley when his companions reached the wasteway. They could hear the voices of the two men indistinctly.

Hocker motioned Ned to the rear seat beside Abner; then seizing the oars he pulled the boat swiftly into the deep shadows under the mill. The next step was a more difficult one.

Bidding Abner take the oars, and keep the boat in

the same position if possible, he tossed the rope over the very beam to which Ned had descended, and catching the end, tied it to the main part of the rope in such a way as to form a sort of swinging loop, which could not slip. By standing on the seat he managed to get one foot in this loop; then clutching both parts of the rope he drew himself quickly up, and after swaying to and fro for an instant, threw one arm over the rafter. An instant later he was straddling it, and pulling the rope after him he untied the loop.

"Now, lad," he whispered, "call your companions. They won't know my voice."

But this was rendered unnecessary by a sudden rasping noise above, as the loose plank was carefully lifted from its place.

"Randy! Randy!" whispered Ned. "It's all right. We're going to rescue you."

A glad murmur of voices was heard, and Randy incautiously replied: "Hurry up then. Now's your time, for Moxley is at the other end of the mill talking."

"Not so loud, lad," whispered Hocker. "Hold steady now and look out for the rope end."

But before Hocker could throw it footsteps came hastily over the floor above, and then a loud shrill whistle was heard — Jeffries's signal.

An instant of breathless suspense was followed by the sudden thrusting of a shiny object through a hole in the floor a little to one side of the closet.

"No you don't," cried Moxley in a savage voice. "You can't play that game on me. Get out of that at once, or I'll riddle you with buckshot. In ten seconds I shoot."

It was not a time to hesitate or parley. The plank dropped into place, and by a reckless swing and drop Hocker landed fairly in the center of the boat, very nearly capsizing it. Abner dropped the oars, and the current whirled the craft swiftly down the wasteway.

It was a bitter disappointment, especially to Ned. Jeffries hastened to the spot as the party landed.

"I'm awful sorry," he said, "but it couldn't be helped. The rascal must have heard some noise you made."

"It's hard luck, that's a fact," muttered Hocker. "I'll square accounts with that scoundrel afore I'm many hours older. The idea of his threatenin' to shoot me with my own gun; that's what riles me most. It's a pity we didn't get the food up. The boys'll have to starve a little longer, I reckon."

"It will be only a little, too," replied Jeffries grimly. "I don't intend to stand any more nonsense. We'll think over the matter and decide on some kind of a move. Moxley has got to come out of that mill. That settles it."

The party went slowly back to the bushes, and Ned satisfied his hunger with the bread and cold meat Abner had brought, while Jeffries and Hocker carried on a low, earnest discussion.

Presently the quiet was interrupted in an unex-

pected manner. Being restless and unhappy Bug wandered up toward the mill, and unwittingly strayed into a patch of silvery moonlight.

Moxley must have been on the watch, and the sight of his old chum put him into a fury. He was ignorant of Ned's escape, and naturally attributed his misfortunes to Bug.

"You black hearted dog," he cried savagely. "I'll get square with you. If I go to jail you'll go with me. It was all your fault anyhow. You persuaded me to go after these boys, and it was you who broke into the cabin and stole the gun and boat. I tried to keep you from it, but you wouldn't listen.

"Oh, you'll pay up for your treachery. I'll swear to all these things — and a good many more — in court. That is if I get there — which ain't at all likely. And if I *do* get out of this hole I'll hunt you down, if it takes a year."

Moxley's rage was so violent that Bug prudently retreated to the bushes.

The ruffian kept up his abuse and called Bug all manner of vile names until he was compelled to stop for sheer want of breath.

Bug came down to Hocker and Jeffries and stood before them.

"Look here," he said hoarsely, "what that rascal says ain't true — at least the most of it ain't. What part I had in stealin' the boat I've made amends fur already, and now I'm willing to do a good deal more. A little while ago I felt kinder sorry for Moxley be-

cause me an' him has been together a good part of the summer. But when a man goes back on an old friend, an' calls him bad names, an' tries to get him into trouble by lyin', then I'm done with that man fur good.

"I'd sooner see him in jail now than runnin' loose, an' if you give me a fair show an' take these irons off, I'll find a way to get into that mill and capture the mean rascal. He's more'n half drunk now, and I'm a good deal stronger than I look. When the chance comes I'll know how to use it. I'm talkin' on my honor now, an' mean what I say. You needn't be afraid to turn me loose. I can't escape if I'd want to. You know that."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BURNING OF THE MILL

THERE was no mistaking the sincerity of Bug's proposal, and coming, as it did, at a time when Hocker and Jeffries were unable to decide on any feasible plan of action, they were disposed to give a favorable answer.

"It ain't a bad idea," said Jeffries. "But how do you expect to get in without being seen?"

"I'll find a way," returned Bug. "There air plenty of holes an' loose boards."

"An' Moxley is watchin' them all, too," remarked Hocker. "Your plan ain't very definite so far."

Bug hesitated, and before he could reply something occurred that totally changed the situation.

"I see you again, you rascal," came the farmer's voice from the hillside. "You can't fool me. Get away from that winder now."

Hocker and Jeffries exchanged glances of mutual understanding. The latter quickly unlocked the bracelets and freed Bug's wrists.

"Now's your chance," he whispered. "Moxley is on the second floor. Slip in before he comes down. There's a loose board just below that middle window.

There ain't time for more than one to get in or we'd follow you. When you need us sing out. Here, take this."

He pressed a pistol into Bug's hand, and the latter bounded noiselessly up the slope. He reached the mill, drew the lower end of a loose plank a foot from its place, and vanished through the orifice.

Let us follow Bug on his perilous quest. Not until he was fairly inside, and crawling on hands and knees over the rickety floor, did he realize the great danger that lay in what he had undertaken to do. For an instant he trembled with fear, and then the memory of his wrongs steeled his heart and nerves.

A sudden noise overheard caused him to crouch midway on the floor. A moment later the stairway creaked, and Moxley began to descend. His progress could be noted as he passed the crevices in the wall.

Bug lay motionless, wondering what he should do next. The possibility of being discovered made him tremble violently. He quite forgot that he had a pistol.

Moxley had now reached the floor, and with cautious steps he moved along the wall toward the lower corner.

Suddenly there was a sound of a heavy fall, followed by a volley of profanity, and the next instant something flew against the wall, and was shivered to fragments that fell with a tinkling noise.

"He's tipped over a bottle," thought Bug, "and

now he's smashed it because he's mad. That's like Moxley."

This haphazard guess was absolutely correct. All was silent for a second or two after the glass had fallen; then Moxley grumbled in an audible tone: "Confound the luck! I hope that wasn't my whisky bottle. It ain't in my pocket."

Of such dire import did the question seem to the ruffian that he ventured to strike a match — little dreaming what the impulse would cost him.

Bug's heart beat wildly when he heard the crack and saw the light flash through the darkness. He jammed the pistol into his pocket and rose on his hands and knees.

Moxley was standing before the sawdust heap with his face to the wall. As the match flared up he dropped the gun and seized a greenish bottle that was lying at his feet.

"Here's luck!" he muttered contentedly. "It was the oil bottle I brought from the canoes that got in my way."

He lifted the fiery poison to his lips, still holding the burning match between the fingers of his other hand, and remained in this attitude for a brief moment.

Bug stood erect and moved across the floor with the caution of a creeping tigress. Nearer and nearer he came, and when less than four feet separated him from his intended victim, Moxley heard some slight noise and wheeled around.

Bug was on him with one spring, and down they fell with a great crash, and rolled in furious strife over the shaking floor — Bug crying for help at the top of his voice, Moxley uttering hoarse threats and imprecations.

Blinded with rage they did not observe that the burning end of the match had fallen on the very spot where the widely scattered kerosene oil was most plentiful. Even when the hissing blue flames spurted up and licked the rubbish on all sides with greedy tongues, they fought on desperately, now one uppermost, now the other, as they verged toward the center of the floor.

When Hocker and Jeffries burst into the mill, followed by Ned and Abner, the conflagration was beyond control. The flames were devouring the planking of the wall with a great roaring and crackling, spreading on each side and to the floor above.

The scene was one long to be remembered. The cries of the struggling men on the floor mingled with the furious kicking and shouting that came from the imprisoned boys in the closet, and amid all the din and confusion the farmer rushed down from the hillside and battered his way into the mill with the butt end of his gun.

Fright gave Moxley the strength of a madman, and by a determined effort he tore loose from his plucky assailant, and springing to his feet started to run. He struck Hocker, who jumped in front of him, a furious blow that sent him reeling backward, but

before he could make use of his advantage, he tripped on a log, and came down heavily.

As he partially rose Bug leaped upon him, and both men rolled over to the edge of a gaping hole in the floor. They struggled an instant on the brink, and then fell through, landing with a terrific splash in the flooded wasteway far below.

Hocker and Jeffries rushed precipitately from the mill to head them off, while the farmer insanely attempted to check the conflagration by tramping through the *débris* that was burning here and there on the floor.

The whole affair had taken place in a very few seconds, and Ned was at first so dazed by the confusion and the flames that he was quite incapable of doing anything. The terrified cries of his companions roused him from his stupor, and he dashed through the intense heat to the closet door.

A quick jerk threw the bolt open, and the frightened boys poured out. The lurid glare of the flames and the spark laden volumes of smoke were more than they could stand. One and all bolted for the nearest aperture in the creek side of the mill, and fortunately reached it without falling through the gaps in the floor.

Ned would gladly have followed their example, but he suddenly bethought him of the plunder Moxley had packed up to carry away. Such a loss would be irreparable, and without hesitation he dashed toward the burning wall.

The heat was intense, but he managed to get near enough to snatch the bag. One end was badly scorched. He suddenly spied Hocker's gun, and knowing how the owner valued it, he made another rush and carried it off in triumph.

Thus laden down he tottered across the floor in imminent fear of dropping through to the wasteway, and overwhelmed at times by the suffocating smoke and fiery sparks. When his courage and endurance were all but spent he reached a broken place in the wall and staggered into the refreshing outer air. How good it seemed!

Abner had long since preceded him, and the farmer made his appearance a moment later, still grasping Randy's blackened gun. The boys had been waiting on Ned in terrible suspense, afraid to venture back into the mill, and when he appeared with his burden their joy knew no bounds.

They were ignorant of the disaster that had befallen Bug and Moxley, and when Ned told them, the whole party started off on a run.

They searched the wasteway just as Jeffries and Hocker landed from the boat, pushing Moxley before them, and followed by Bug. The ruffian's hands were already manacled. With the exception of dripping clothes neither of the men seemed the worse for their struggle and subsequent fall.

"They were still locked together when we pulled them from the water," said Jeffries. "That little fellow is a plucky one. He deserves great credit for

raising the siege. We've got our man at last, and bitterly he'll rue this night's work."

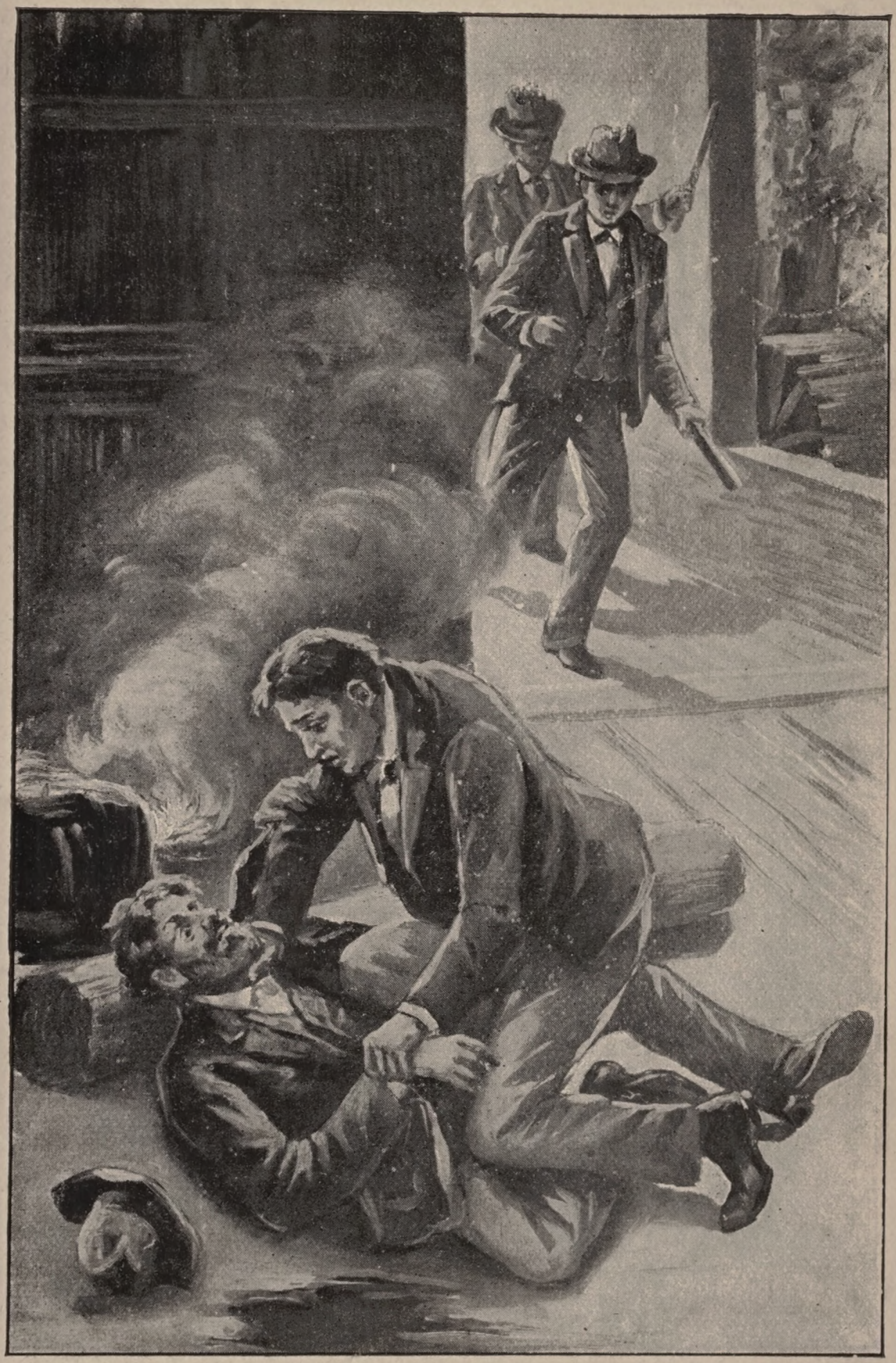
"It's a bad job fur me, too," observed the farmer. "The old mill will soon be a heap of ashes. It's insured fur about what the lumber's worth, but that ain't much consolation. I hate to see it go after standin' here fur nigh onto seventy years."

"It's hard," muttered Hocker, "that's a fact."

Then all were silent, watching the flames as they rose higher and higher, and licked every corner of the doomed building. It was a grand sight while it lasted, but in twenty minutes nothing was left save a few blackened beams and smoldering heaps of ashes.

"That ends the fireworks," said Jeffries. "We may as well be moving along. It's past two o'clock in the morning."

He drew a second pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and to Ned's wrath and indignation, clapped them suddenly on Bug's wrists.



BUG WAS ON HIM WITH ONE SPRING

Canoe Boys and Camp-Fires

CHAPTER XXVIII

A GOOD DEED

NED was the only one who showed any surprise at the constable's action, and quite naturally, since he alone was acquainted with all the facts in the case. Hocker had already taken Moxley to the boat and seated him; the ruffian had lost his defiant manner, and was cowed and sullen. Jeffries now started to follow with Bug, but was stopped by a detaining touch on the arm.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jeffries," said Ned, trying hard to control his feelings, "but you surely don't intend to carry off Bug to jail after all he has done to-night? We owe everything to him."

Jeffries looked at the lad half sternly.

"Law is law," he replied in a pompous tone. "I am an officer of justice, and must do my duty. This fellow was clearly concerned in the theft of Hocker's gun and boat, and what he did before or after that don't wipe out the crime. Why, if I'd turn him loose now I'd be compoundin' a felony. Of course I'll speak a good word for him when he comes up for trial — I'll promise you that — and it may lessen his sentence."

"Jeffries is right," said the farmer. "If a man will commit crimes he must suffer for them. Both fellows air guilty, no doubt."

Bug threw a grateful glance at Ned, and then turned appealingly to Hocker.

"I don't deny that I was with Moxley when he broke into your cabin," he said huskily, "but I was only with him because I wanted to help these boys. I couldn't leave him without spoilin' my plans, and I couldn't persuade him to let the cabin alone, though I tried hard enough. He gave me the slip next morning, as it was, an' I had to tramp it down the creek the rest of the way. It's purty hard fer a feller to get into a scrape like this under them circumstances."

Hocker's face wore a perplexed expression as he replied slowly:

"I'm sure I don't know what to say. Jeffries has the law at his finger ends, and it ain't fur me to contradict him. I reckon things will have to take their course."

Bug's hopeless looks and attitude went straight to Ned's heart, and he resolved to make a final appeal in his behalf. He was satisfied that Hocker would help him if he could be made to see the matter in its proper light, so he drew him aside and told all he knew about Bug in a simple, earnest way — dwelling especially on the fact that Bug's desire to keep the boys out of a scrape was the sole cause of his own misfortune.

The appeal carried conviction with it, and Hocker's sympathies were aroused.

"I reckon I can fix this matter," he said after a little consideration. "I owe you lads something anyhow, and this is a good time to pay the debt."

Hocker was as good as his word. He walked over to the boat and surprised Jeffries by saying in a grave tone, "Look here, old man; I've sorter veered round on this thing. Now that I've got Moxley safe and sound I don't intend to prosecute the other chap. I reckon what he says is true, an' you know yourself what he did fur us to-night — more than you or me would have done. He deserves to go free."

"Well, if you're determined not to make a charge, why that settles it," replied Jeffries a little stiffly. "I have nothing agin him personally, and I hope he'll take warning by this affair and keep out of bad company."

He turned around and quickly removed Bug's handcuffs.

"You're a free man now," he said. "See that you stay free and justify the clemency of the law by leadin' a respectable life in future."

Bug was dazed at first by the unexpected transition from despair to hope. He stammered out a few inarticulate words of gratitude to Hocker and Jeffries and then approached Ned.

"This is your doin'," he said brokenly. "You saved me from goin' to jail. I shan't forget it —" He choked and broke off short.

Ned drew him down the wasteway to a little clump of bushes, out of earshot of the others.

"Bug," he said earnestly, "if you are really grateful to me for saving you from a term in prison, I'll tell you how you can prove it. Your brother told me the whole story of your life, and what a shadow it has cast on your home. You are breaking your mother's heart, and even your father feels the disgrace keenly, and would welcome you back if you came prepared to lead a different life. Go home, Bug, and make them all happy. You will never regret it if you do. You are not bad at heart, I know, and evil company has been the cause of all your trouble. Let Moxley's fate be a warning to you. Turn over a new leaf from to-night. Will you do it, Bug? Will you go straight home and lead an honest, respectable life?"

Tears were standing in Bug's eyes, and he brushed them away with his coat sleeve.

"I'll do it," he said in a firm, but husky voice. "I've been wantin' to go home fur a long time, but I didn't dare to. I'm sick enough of livin' in this way, an' what you've done an' said to-night will make a different man of me. I mean it all, and I'll stick to it. I'll do no more lyin' or stealin', and I'll keep away from bad company. I'll stay at home and work. Here's my fist on it."

Ned warmly shook the proffered hand, and then both went slowly back to the boat.

Bug's appearance was the signal for a most out-

rageous burst of profanity and threats from Moxley, and when Jeffries had finally subdued the ruffian by strong measures, the whole party crossed the waste-way, and moved up to the farmhouse, which was half a mile distant.

Mrs. Zinn spread a huge table with all sorts of tempting food, and the starved boys attacked it with a vigor that made her open her eyes in amazement. The others were almost as hungry after all they had gone through that night, and did ample justice to the viands. Moxley's bracelets were taken off and he was allowed to eat his fill with the rest.

It was four o'clock on Saturday morning before the tired crowd got to sleep. The four boys were given a room containing two large beds, and the adjoining apartment was occupied by Hocker and Jeffries, and their prisoner. Bug was accommodated with a cushioned settee in the kitchen.

The boys woke up, refreshed in mind and body, about three o'clock in the afternoon. They came down stairs just in time to see Hocker and Jeffries drive away in a buggy with the sullen faced prisoner between them. Hocker had made arrangements with the farmer to take the boat back to the cabin in a wagon.

Moxley had been compelled to disgorge his plunder, and the boys were highly gratified when Jeffries handed over the watches and money the tramp had so coolly taken from them.

Half an hour after the trio had departed for Car-

lisle jail Bug took an earnest farewell of the boys, and struck across the country in a bee line for his home at the Gap. His last word to Ned was a renewal of the promise to stay at home and lead an honest life, and Ned sincerely believed that he meant it.

"That load of salt I put into Moxley's legs turned out for the best after all," said Randy in a roguish tone. "If I hadn't pulled trigger that night Bug Batters would still be treading the path of wickedness, with no hope of a reformation."

"Your foolishness had one good result, I'll admit," replied Ned. "But don't try the experiment again. It's too costly."

The boys tacitly agreed with Ned. Even Bug's conversion was rather a high price to pay for the fright and indignities they had endured at the hands of Mr. Dude Moxley. They remembered also that the burning of the mill was indirectly due to Randy's foolish shot.

The certain prospect of the insurance money effectively silenced any resentment that Mr. Zinn might otherwise have felt toward the boys. He warmly invited them to stay over Sunday, and the invitation was promptly accepted. They went down after supper to examine the canoes, and allowed them to remain where they were on the farmer's assurance that nothing could happen to them. The grain bag containing the greater part of the baggage had been taken up the house the night before. The tin boxes had perished in the flames, but this was a trifling loss,

and did not trouble the boys much in the light of what might have been.

Sunday was a day of peaceful enjoyment after the turbulent events of the past week.

"Three square meals were not to be sneezed at," as Randy irreverently expressed it; and not the least pleasing incident of the day was the five mile drive to a country church with the farmer's family, on which occasion Nugget braved the ridicule of his companions, and proudly wore his linen shirt and piqué vest.

Monday morning dawned clear as a whistle, and after a hearty breakfast the boys trudged down to the creek laden with all manner of country produce, for which the good natured farmer would accept only a beggarly recompense.

Half an hour later the gold and crimson pennant fluttered proudly in the breeze as it led the Jolly Rovers down the swift and turbid channel — for the creek was still a few feet above low water mark.

CHAPTER XXIX

RANDY GOES SAILING

MONDAY and Tuesday of that week were rather uneventful days. The boys paddled steadily, and with the aid of the rapid current covered a good many miles.

On both evenings they found suitable camping places, and had some excellent sport fishing for catfish and eels by night.

The creek was almost at its normal level now, but Wednesday morning dawned amid conditions that promised a speedy repetition of the high water. The sky was hidden by murky gray clouds that hung far down toward the earth. So thick were they that no mist that blurred the hills and the windings of the faintest glimmer of the sun could peep through. A creek was in the air, and the east wind had a keen, biting touch that was more in harmony with November than July.

Some discussion ensued at first on the question of breaking camp under such circumstances, but it was finally decided in the affirmative.

"This place won't shelter us very well if a heavy rain comes on," said Ned. "The chances are that it

won't rain before afternoon or night, so we had better make the most of what time we have by choosing a better spot."

The value of Ned's advice had been tested on many previous occasions, so preparations to start were hastily commenced. This was about eight o'clock in the morning, after breakfast had been eaten and the dishes cleared away.

Randy was the first one up that morning, and much to the mystification of his companions he had been working since daybreak in a thicket of young timber not far behind the camp. Just as the tent was being rolled up he made his appearance with a lurking smile on his face, and under his arm a bundle that resembled a red flannel seine wrapped tightly on its sticks.

"Hullo, Randy, what have you there?" queried Nugget.

"What is it?" exclaimed Clay, in a tone that implied some doubt as to whether he referred to Randy or the object under his arm.

But Randy was not disposed to be communicative just then.

"You'll know what it is in good time," he replied, and then turning to Ned he asked: "Can I have one of the tent poles?"

"What do you want with it?" demanded Ned. "Has it anything to do with that piece of tomfoolery?"

"Yes, it has," replied Randy aggressively. "That

piece of tomfoolery, as you call it, is a sail. I'll make you fellows open your eyes after a while."

"I don't doubt it," exclaimed Ned laughingly, "There will be lots of sport in watching you try to sail on a stream like this. And what a sail, too! Why, it's made out of a red blanket! What put the notion into your head, Randy?"

"Oh, you can make all the fun of it, you please," replied Randy; "you'll all wish you had one like it after a while. Just look at that breeze blowing straight down the creek. In an hour from now it will be twice as strong, and then I'll leave you fellows so far behind that you can't overtake me in a week."

"It doesn't occur to him that the creek changes its course about every half mile," reflected Ned as he resumed his work. "If he tries the thing on he'll come to grief."

Randy was troubled by no such misgivings. He appropriated one of the jointed tent poles and lashed it on the fore deck of his canoe beside the queer looking sail. The Water Sprite, it may be said, had been built with a view to sailing, and it contained a mast hole and block just forward of the cockpit.

Not until the Jolly Rovers had been afloat an hour or two did Randy's opportunity come, for during that time the channel was one succession of short, jerky curves that encountered the wind every which way. But his patience was finally rewarded by a clear half mile stretch of water, licked into tiny undulations by a crisp down breeze.

Randy discreetly grounded the canoe on a little grass bar in midchannel, and proceeded to rig up. His sail was merely a light weight blanket with each of its narrow ends sewed to a trimmed sapling — just like a banner, in fact. He attached this to his improvised mast, fastened each end securely, and drove the latter into the mast hole.

The Water Sprite was quite transformed by the addition. It presented a quaint, foreign apppearance, for the high square sail was exactly like that of a Chinese junk, while its flaming red color was irresistibly suggestive of the craft that ply in Venetian lagoons.

So Randy thought, anyhow, and he was more than pleased with his handiwork. He applied the finishing touches by tying a cord to each lower corner of the sail, and by this device he proudly hoped to control the movements of the canoe.

Randy was considerably overestimating his skill as a sailing master, but no one could have made him believe it at the time. He proudly seated himself, and with a shove of the paddle freed the canoe from the bar.

The breeze quickly bulged out the thirty square feet of sail, and away went the Water Sprite like a Chinese pirate in chase of booty. It gained speed with every instant, and swept by the sluggish little fleet of canoes under full pressure.

Randy turned around to laugh and wave his hand. He had to admit to himself that he was very glad the

boys were now in the rear, for the sail hung so low that he could see no further than the prow of his canoe. Still more disconcerting was the fact that the cords were useless, since the least jerk to right or left threatened to capsize the canoe instantly.

"I must keep a sharp eye on the shores if I want to stay in midchannel," thought Randy. "I'm good for half a mile of this, anyhow, before the wind changes."

But his calculation did not embrace any possible obstructions that might lie in the way, and Randy was considerably surprised to find himself grounded on a ledge of rocks before five minutes had passed. It was hard work to get the canoe free, and just as he succeeded the boys caught up with him.

"Better take the sail down now," suggested Ned. "You'll surely run into something if you don't."

"No danger," laughed Randy. "I'll stop before I get to the curve. This is great sport. You fellows just ought to try it."

He sent the Water Sprite off again by a touch of his paddle and skimmed swiftly away from his half envious companions, leaving a trail of foam behind him.

It was aggravating to be thus outstrippped and the boys started to paddle with all their might. For a little while they actually seemed to gain on Randy, but a lively puff of wind came down the creek, and the Water Sprite took a spurt that made the chase hopeless.

The wind had veered a slight degree, and without

knowing it Randy was now paddling straight for a bushy point of land that jutted out from the left shore exactly where the channel made its abrupt bend. Just below this little promontory, and in midstream, was anchored a long, squarely built flatboat.

It had three occupants. On a low stool in the very center sat a tremendously stout man in a blue flannel shirt and wide brimmed straw hat. Beside him was a lean, scrawny man sitting on an upturned bucket. The other end of the boat was occupied by a yellow dog, whose eyes were fixed with intent longing on a lunch basket a few feet distant.

The big fat man held in one hand a light, slender fishing rod, while the little lean man supported on his knees a twenty foot pole that looked like a young tree denuded of its branches. Both were waiting patiently for a bite — as was also the dog — and under the circumstances it did not occur to them to look around.

Meanwhile the Water Sprite swept onward to the jutting point of land, and missed it by little more than a hair's breadth, just as Randy turned pale with the sudden discovery of his danger. He breathed easier as the canoe passed swiftly on toward midchannel. He could see nothing ahead, and was therefore blissfully ignorant of the obstruction that now lay in his path.

Just at this moment the three boys, coming on behind, caught a glimpse of the anchored boat and were quick to grasp the situation.

"Look out, Randy!" cried Ned at the top of his voice. "Danger ahead! Paddle to the right, quick!"

Randy turned around and looked stupidly at his companions for an instant. Then he seized the paddle and tried hard to follow Ned's advice. Too late! The Water Sprite was forging ahead now under full pressure, and was not to be diverted from its course.

The two occupants of the boat had heard Ned's warning cry without catching the words, but they did not turn around because each happened to have a bite at that moment.

Then the little man jerked out a plump catfish, and as he reached for the line, which had swung behind him, he saw the flaming red sail looming almost overhead. He had barely time to spring to his feet and utter a terrific yell, when the collision came.

The shock tossed the fat man off the stool and threw him across the edge of the boat. As the little man was knocked down at the same instant, the one sided pressure naturally caused the boat to tip, and over it went, throwing fishermen, dog, and all into the water.

CHAPTER XXX

A NIGHT ALARM

By that strange destiny which oftentimes frowns on the good and lends a helping hand to the evil, Randy experienced no very disastrous results from the collision. The canoe rebounded a few feet, and the sail fell from the mastpole into the water.

He was terribly shaken up, it is true, but far greater was the shock when he realized what he had done. At first nothing was visible but the upturned boat and a yellow dog paddling on all fours for the nearest bank.

It was manifestly impossible that the dog could have been the only occupant of the boat, and besides Randy had heard a shrill cry just before the collision. He was much relieved therefore when a head shot above the water a few feet below the boat.

This belonged to the little man, and an instant later his fat companion came to the surface. The latter had lost his hat, and the top of his head was as white and shiny as a billiard ball.

The little man sounded for bottom, and not finding it, swam vigorously for shore. The fat man tried the same experiment, and being a good head and a

half taller than his companion, obtained footing at a depth which brought the water almost to his chin. Having thus strengthened his position, he spat the water from his mouth and turned his head around to see what occult power was responsible for his misfortune.

When he saw Randy quietly sitting in the canoe a few yards above his face purpled with rage.

"You'll pay for this outrage," he stuttered hoarsely. "I'll beat you black and blue when I get hold of you. I'll give you six months in the county jail at hard labor, you brainless young ruffian — you audacious wooden headed idiot, you —"

Just then the angry gentleman's string of epithets was cut short in a summary manner, for the wet folds of the blanket sail, which had somehow managed to drift around the corner of the boat, slapped him on the mouth, and the unexpected shock caused him to lose his balance and slip under water.

Such an opportunity was not to be neglected, and with quick, furious strokes Randy paddled around the upturned boat and headed down stream, bent on escaping the promised chastisement.

The fat man came up directly beneath the sail, and consequently had to go under for a second attempt. This time he was all right, and the moment his head was out of water and his feet planted on the bottom he caught sight of Randy, who was just gliding by at a distance of half a dozen feet.

"Stop, you rascal, stop!" he yelled hoarsely.

Randy did not obey; he only paddled the faster.

The irascible old fellow glared at him in helpless rage for a second, and then his face lit up with an awful smile as he saw the big fishing pole floating on the water within reach. The line was fastened in some way to the boat.

It was the work of an instant to snatch the pole and tear it free. Then lifting it overhead the man made a furious stroke at the rapidly receding canoe.

Whisk! whisk! came the elastic end with stinging force against Randy's back and shoulders. Maddened by the pain he partially rose and leaned forward. At the second blow he reeled to one side, stumbled against the combing, and went out of the canoe backward without upsetting it.

His enemy was by no means satisfied with what punishment he had already inflicted. He dropped the pole, and made haste to join the little man and yellow dog on the bank.

"Ebenezer," he cried angrily, "pursue that young rascal. Chase him down the creek. If you catch him I'll give you a five dollar bill.

More from fear of disobeying than from any hope of earning the reward, the little man started off on a run with the yellow dog at his heels.

Just at this moment Ned and his companions reached the scene of the disaster. The fat man stopped wringing the water from his trousers to shake his fist at them.

"You're all alike," he growled, "all alike! I

never saw a boy that wasn't a born reprobate. I wish I had you out on shore; I'd teach you a lesson."

Ned tried to explain that the upsetting of the boat was a pure accident, but the angry man refused to hear him.

"Don't tell me," he muttered, "I know better."

Realizing that further argument would be futile, the boys made what amends they could by chasing the two fishing rods and the hat, and then lifting the anchors of the boat and pushing it to shore.

The fat man acknowledged these favors with a surly nod of his head, and so threatening was his manner that the boys hastily retreated from the bank, and paddled down stream, stopping on the way to recover the sail.

Meanwhile Randy had quietly swum down the creek some distance, pushing the canoe ahead of him, and landed on the left shore. The boys could see him plainly as he stood on a rock wringing the water from his clothes.

Having no inclination to swim the creek, Ebenezer had given up the chase and was now returning along the right bank. When he came opposite the boys Ned called out:

"Say, tell me who that stout gentleman is, will you?"

The little man hesitated before replying. "That's Judge Gibson, of Carlisle," he said finally in a very impressive tone. "You fellers may be glad you ain't sittin' afore him in the dock this minute — especially

that chap down yonder. O, my! wouldn't you get salty sentences though!"

A loud summons from the judge started the little man off in a hurry, and the conversation came to an abrupt ending.

The boys soon joined Randy, and finding him in a decidedly bad temper, they made as little allusion as possible to what had occurred. It was evident from the way he shrugged his shoulders that the blows of the fishing pole had left a good deal of a sting.

Not knowing what might be expected of Judge Gibson, the boys concluded to be on the safe side, and as soon as Randy had changed his clothes they paddled away from the vicinity.

About one o'clock a halt was made for lunch, and as the air was disagreeably damp and cutting, Ned boiled a pot of coffee.

The cruise was resumed an hour later, and during the afternoon a close watch was kept for suitable camping places. The indications all presaged bad weather, and there was no doubt that rain would set in by morning — if not sooner.

About four o'clock a camping ground was discovered that met with general approval — a sheltered spot amid great pine trees on the right bank. In the rear was a steep hill, and a limestone spring was conveniently close..

The boys spent just one solid hour in arranging things to their satisfaction, for their stay was likely

to be a protracted one, and they wanted everything snug and comfortable before the rain came.

The tent was staked with more than ordinary care, and then a ditch was dug around all four sides and the dirt thrown on the edges of the canvas. A stone fireplace was built between two trees and within easy reach of the tent door.

A layer of fragrant pine boughs was spread on the floor of the tent, and both front corners were piled with firewood. The arrangements were completed by dragging the canoes to the top of the bank and removing all that they contained.

"That is what I call snug," said Randy complacently. "I won't mind staying here two or three days. How are we fixed for provisions?"

"Bread will run short to-morrow, but we have plenty of everything else," replied Ned. "No doubt there are farm houses near."

This satisfactory report encouraged the boys to prepare a more than usually sumptuous supper. They washed the dishes by firelight, and just as the last one was dried the rain began to fall — at first in pattering drops, then in a steady, persistent sheet.

A great log was thrown on the fire, and after a short chat in its warm glow the boys drew the tent flaps, and were soon sleeping soundly on the soft pine boughs.

Some time in the night Ned awoke, and feeling thirsty sat up and reached for the pail of water and

tin cup which were always kept just outside the tent door.

He took a drink and was in the act of putting the cup down when he heard distinct footsteps outside. They passed the tent and went on toward the creek. Whoever the nocturnal stroller might be he was taking no pains to conceal his presence.

"Say Ned, is that you?" came in a startled whisper from the rear of the tent.

Ned recognized Randy's voice.

"Are *you* awake?" he exclaimed in surprise. "Don't make any noise. Some one is walking about outside."

"I know it," replied Randy. "That's what wakened me. My gun is missing. I had it right beside me, and now it's gone."

"By Jove! this looks serious," muttered Ned. "Wait a moment," he added. "I'll take a peep outside. It's pitch dark and I can't be seen."

He quickly lifted one flap of the tent and crawled under. A few seconds passed — full of terrible suspense to Randy — and then came a clattering noise followed by a brief red flash and a stunning report.

CHAPTER XXXI

STORMY WEATHER

It was Ned's intention, when he crawled out of the tent, to dodge behind the nearest tree, where he could see without being seen. But as he rose to his feet a dark figure suddenly obscured the faint embers of the fire, and a second later came the fall and the report which struck such a terror to Randy's heart as he waited in the darkness of the tent.

Ned understood the situation instantly. The unknown prowler had stumbled over the fireplace in his retreat, and the stolen gun had been exploded by striking the stones.

For two or three seconds there was nothing to indicate that the thief had been hit by the charge. Then a shrill yell rang hrough the woods and another and another in rapid succession.

"Randy! Randy! Come out here!" shouted Ned in a terrified voice. "Light the lantern and waken the boys."

The next instant Randy burst through the flaps.

"Here is the lantern," he gasped. "I have no matches. Good gracious! but you scared me. I thought you were shot."

"*I'm* not, but I fear some one else is," replied Ned as he hastily struck a match and applied it to the wick of the lantern.

That instant Clay hurried out of the tent, and the three boys advanced timidly to the fireplace. The supposed robber had ceased his outcry, and was propped in an upright position against a heap of stones. Ned turned the lantern on his face and staggered back with a cry of amazement.

"*Why, it's Nugget!*" he exclaimed. "What under the sun does this mean?"

It was indeed Nugget, and he looked the very picture of fright as he rolled his eyes wildly from one to the other of his friends. It was several seconds before he could speak.

"Where am I?" he gasped. "Who put me out here in the rain? I thought I heard a gun go off."

He was evidently not injured — the position of the gun proved that — and the boys began to appreciate the ludicrous side of the situation.

"You've been walking in your sleep," exclaimed Ned, as a sudden light broke on his mind. "I'll bet a dollar that's just it. Did you ever do such a thing before, Nugget?"

Nugget hesitated and passed his hand over his forehead.

"Yes," he said reflectively; "I used to walk in my sleep sometimes, but that was long ago. I thought the habit was broken."

"Don't you remember anything about this affair?"

resumed Ned. "You must have taken Randy's gun and left the tent without waking us."

"Yes; I have a sort of recollection of it," answered Nugget sheepishly. "I guess I must have been dreaming. I thought I was in Central Park at home, and the animals broke out of the menagerie. I had a gun in my hand, and when a big lion ran after me I ran away. Then I fell over a bench and the gun went off — and — and I don't think I remember any more. It was an awful dream. I thought the lion would eat me up."

This story was more than the boys could stand. They laughed so long and heartily that Nugget recovered from his scare and got angry instead.

"You fellows would laugh the other way if that gun had been pointed toward the tent when it went off," he said sullenly; "and besides there is no fun in having such a dream."

"Nugget is right," exclaimed Ned. "The affair is too serious for ridicule. It's almost a miracle he was not shot. And by the way, Randy, I've told you often not to keep that gun loaded. Think what might have happened to-night in consequence of your folly."

Randy looked penitent, and for a wonder accepted the rebuke quietly.

"I forgot, Ned, indeed I did," he said earnestly. "I put a shell in for snipe this afternoon, and never thought about it again. After this I'll examine the gun every night."

"If it was accidental that alters the case," replied Ned. "And now suppose we turn in. There is no use in standing here in the rain any longer."

The boys went back to the tent, and to prevent a second attempt at sleep-walking they made Nugget take the middle place. Five minutes later all were sleeping as soundly as before the alarm.

The next morning it was raining hard, and in fact it continued to rain at intervals all of that day and the next. The boys found the time hang a little heavy, although they sallied out in rubber coats, and had some excellent sport fishing for catfish.

Cooking was not interfered with, since the fireplace was in a sheltered position, and the tent was at all times snug and waterproof, in spite of some of the heaviest showers that the boys had ever known.

Rain was still falling at daybreak on Saturday, but about ten o'clock the sky cleared, and the sun came out—greatly to the delight of the Jolly Rovers.

As the next day was Sunday, and the camp was in such a good location, they decided to remain until Monday morning. This turned out to be a wise decision, for shortly after dinner a thunder storm swept down the valley, and for several hours the rain fell in torrents. By evening not a cloud was in sight, and indications pointed to a spell of clear weather.

Of course the creek was by this time very high and muddy, and was still on the rise. The water had crept three feet up the slope on top of which the

tent was pitched, but as three feet more remained to be covered the boys felt no uneasiness.

There was still higher ground behind them on which they could take refuge if the necessity came.

After supper Ned got out his map, and began to study it with great care.

"Has it occurred to any of you fellows that we are drawing near home?" he asked finally. "We passed Honck's dam on Wednesday afternoon, and our present camp is very near Sporting Green. There are only four more dams between us and the Susquehanna, and the distance can't be much over thirty miles."

The others were rather surprised to hear this, and could not make up their minds at first whether to be glad or sorry.

"I can hardly realize it," said Randy. "The time has certainly slipped by very quickly, and yet it was three weeks yesterday since we started."

"I hate to think that the cruise is nearly over," remarked Clay, "but all the same it will be nice to get home again."

Ned laughed as he folded up the map and put it in his pocket.

"I know just how you feel," he sad. "It will be very nice to sleep in a soft bed, and eat off a table again, and sit out on the boathouse porch in the evenings; but about a week after you get home you'll wish with all your heart you were back on the creek with the grass for a bed and a rock for a table.

Canoeing is like ice cream — when you once taste it you are always wanting more. It reminds me of what I read about a famous African explorer. He was always glad to get back to civilization for a little while, and then he was more anxious than ever to return to his wild life. It seemed as though he couldn't breathe right anywhere but in Africa."

"I hope canoeing *is* like that," said Randy. "Then we will make lots more trips together. I feel just as you do about it, Ned. I don't like to see the cruise end, but it will be very nice in some ways to get home. Won't the other boys be envious when they see how sunburnt we are, and hear all about the exciting adventures we have had?"

"When will we reach the end of the creek?" asked Nugget with a rapturous expression. "Monday?"

"Hardly," replied Ned. "It will take longer than that. But why are you so anxious to get home, Nugget?"

"He wants to put on a suit of cream colored clothes," exclaimed Clay with mock gravity, "and a boiled shirt and high collar. He is longing to encase his lily white hands in kid gloves, and his dainty feet in patent leathers."

As Nugget blushed an angry red, and made no reply, it is to be presumed that Clay's remark contained more truth than fiction.

"You fellows are all counting your chickens too soon," said Ned. "A good many miles separate us

from home, and as likely as not there are more rough times in store for us."

Lightly spoken and lightly meant were these words, but Ned recalled them under thrilling circumstances a day or two later.

All day Sunday the creek continued to rise slowly until it was just a foot from the top of the bank. It was stationary at nine o'clock in the evening, and when it began to fall two hours later the boys turned in, satisfied that the danger was over.

The water receded a foot and a half during the night, but when Monday morning dawned with a clear sky the flood was still a sight to behold as it rolled swiftly by the camp, its smooth yellow surface dotted with tangled grasses and driftwood.

As far as the boys could see was high and hilly land, but there was no doubt that the lowlands were inundated far on each side of the creek. The rains had been unusually heavy.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BROKEN DAM

By nine o'clock the Jolly Rovers were afloat — adrift would be a better word, since the swift current made the paddles unnecessary, except for a guiding touch now and then. It did not occur to the boys to delay their departure on account of the flood. They were tired of the camping place, and moreover the high water would likely be a help rather than a hindrance.

They found it keenly exhilarating to lean lazily back in their canoes and be carried at a whriling pace around bend after bend. There was just enough danger from submerged islands and reefs, and floating *débris,* to add spice to the enjoyment.

Here and there, where the creek passed through low country, the fields were inundated, and only the tops of the fences could be seen above the water.

A mile or two below camp a sudden sweep of the channel brought into view a red wooden bridge. The creek, being wide at this point, the bridge was supported in the center by a narrow, squarely built pier.

As the boys came closer they saw that the pier had

been shattered by some terrific power. The whole face of it was torn away, and the frail portion that remained seemed in danger of being carried off by the yellow flood that was surging against it. Two men had climbed down from an opening in the bridge, and were busy among the loose stones, evidently trying to fit them into place again. From the left shore a little knot of people was watching the operation.

Naturally the boys were curious to know what it meant, and when they drew near they slackened the speed of the canoes by backing water vigorously with their paddles.

"Did the flood do all that damage?" asked Ned.

"No," answered one of the men, stopping work to look up, "the ice did it last winter, and the commissioners neglected to have it repaired. A pretty bill they're likely to have to pay for their carelessness. It's too late to do anything now."

"That's so," assented the other man; "we may as well stop work and get out of this."

"But what danger are you afraid of now?" resumed Ned. "The pier has stood the worst of the flood and the water is going down."

The first speaker jerked his finger up the creek. "They say that Honck's dam is liable to break at any minute," he answered slowly. "It's a mighty old dam, and has been threatenin' to give 'way fur the last ten years. It's a big high one, too, and has a heap of timber in it. Just as surely as that mass of stuff

comes down the creek with a volume of water behind it, this pier will go to pieces and down will come the bridge."

"Do you really think the dam will break?" asked Ned.

"It's ten to one," was the reply. "They say the edges are giving way now. You fellows had better get off the creek afore it's too late. Them cockle-shell boats won't stand much."

With this warning the speaker climbed up the pier, followed by his companion, and both disappeared in the bridge. The boys lifted their paddles from the water and went swiftly on with the current for the time being.

"These rustics have exaggerated the danger, I'll bet anything," said Randy. "If Honck's dam was going to break it would not have waited until the flood was half way down."

"I don't know about that," replied Ned. "The danger may be very real."

He had given the dam some attention while the canoes were being carried around it on the previous Wednesday, and he now remembered with secret uneasiness that it was very high and rotten, and held in check a vast volume of yater. Terrible would be the consequences if this were suddenly to be freed.

"What are we going to do?" asked Nugget uneasily.

"That man warned us to leave the creek, and he knew what he was talking about."

"We can't very well take his advice now," replied Ned," for there is no landing place in sight."

"There is no use in stopping at all," exclaimed Randy, "if the object is to wait for the dam to break. We might be detained for a week, and then find that the dam was as strong as ever. And besides we could hear the noise in time to get out of the way. All we need to do is keep our ears open and look behind from time to time."

"Even if the dam should break the chances are that with such a current as this we could keep ahead of the flood," suggested Clay. "Don't you think so, Ned?"

"I'm afraid that's doubtful," replied Ned. "At all events I don't think I should care to run a race with the flood even on a start of half a dozen miles. For the present we had better follow Randy's advice and keep our eyes and ears open. If we find a suitable place I am in favor of stopping for an hour or two. We are too near home to risk disaster."

This arrangement was satisfactory to all except Nugget, and he made no outward remonstrance.

For the next two hours all went well, and mile after mile was swiftly traversed. The boys kept in mid-channel so as to reap the fullest advantage from the current.

They looked back from time to time, but neither saw nor heard anything alarming. The smooth yellow flood glided between the wooded banks with scarcely a murmur.

About midday the creek turned a sharp angle, and headed due north in a straight course of fully half a mile. Beyond the steep hills that terminated this stretch the boys could see the distant blue line of the mountains.

The fears of the morning had vanished, and all were in buoyant spirits. The home-coming loomed brightly before them now, for with such a current the Susquehanna would soon be reached.

On the left hand side of the creek stretched a sloping hill, wooded for a distance of two or three hundred yards as it receded from the water, and then merging into open fields. On the right was a rugged cliff full of limestone rocks and scrawly pine trees.

The boys did not pay much attention to their surroundings, but when they were nearly half way to the bend, Randy happened to glance toward the left, and on the very crest of the hill, a good quarter of a mile from the water, he saw a little white farmhouse.

There was nothing in this to attract his attention, but as his gaze lingered he saw a man come out on the porch and glance up the creek, shading his eyes with his hand. Then he turned toward the house, and an instant later two women and another man appeared and looked in the same direction.

This was growing interesting, and Randy called the attention of his companions to the farmhouse. What happened next was stranger still. The little group on the porch suddenly caught sight of the canoes far below them, and one of the men darted quickly into the

house. He reappeared a second or two later with a shiny object in his hand, and placing it to his mouth he blew a shrill discordant blast that echoed far over the hills.

He repeated this twice, and then all of the group began to shout and wave their hands.

The boys glanced at one another in amazement. What was the meaning of such an idiotic performance?

Suddenly Ned turned pale.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "The dam must have broken, and those people can see the flood somewhere up the creek. They are warning us to get out of the way."

The boys instinctively turned to look behind, but the first glance revealed no cause for alarm.

"All right so far," cried Randy. "The current seems to be getting swifter though, and I actually believe the water is rising."

He had hardly spoken when Ned uttered a startled cry. "Look! look! there it comes!"

Around the sharp curve above swept a sloping volume of water, yellow with mud and foam, black with timber and uprooted trees. It came on with a rush and a swelling roar, and as the frightened boys watched it with terrible fascination, a section of a wooden bridge painted red hove in sight.

The imminence of the danger drove the Jolly Rovers into a helpless panic. Even Ned was frightened out of his self possession.

The right shore was the nearest, and the boys pad-

dled for it with furious strokes, not remembering for an instant that it offered the least chance of safety. The swift current whirled the canoes down stream for nearly a hundred yards before it would suffer them to glide into the calmer waters along the bank.

Randy and Clay, being on the outer side, had more to overcome, and were swept beyond their companions. Ned and Nugget drifted against a precipitous wall of rock that rose twenty feet before its surface was broken by the tree or brush.

They looked hopelessly around them, vainly seeking a chance of escape, while louder and louder in their ears sounded the hissing roar of the oncoming flood. At the base of the cliff the water was already boiling and tossing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AN UNDERGROUND CRUISE

"PADDLE on, quick!" cried Ned in an agony of fear. "We may reach a break in the cliff."

Nugget, who was half a canoe's length in advance had sufficiently presence of mind to obey. He paddled off with desperate strokes, and Ned crowded him closely.

A few yards down stream the wall of rock jutted out slightly and then receded. As the canoes rounded this a great heaving wave — the vanguard of the flood — tossed them high on its crest and cast them, like a stone from a catapult, straight toward a black, semi-circular hole in the base of the cliff. A furious current swept in the same direction, and even had the boys realized the nature of this new peril they could have done nothing to help themselves.

Nugget dropped his paddle with a cry of terror and clutched the combing. The next instant he shot into the gaping hole, scraping his cap from his head by contact with the top, and disappeared from view.

Ned was dazed by what he had just witnessed, and his turn came before he realized it. He had hardly time to twist his paddle around longwise and duck his

head when the current sucked him under the cliff. He heard a quick, grating noise, and then the dim gleam of light faded, leaving him in utter darkness.

The canoe pitched and tossed dizzily, and by the cold air that surged on his face, and the spray that spattered him, Ned knew that he was moving at rapid speed. Suddenly a cry rang in his ears with the sharpness of a pistol shot and reverberated through the cavern. An instant later he felt a violent concussion on the right, and reaching out his hand he touched the combing of Nugget's canoe.

He clung to it with all his might and managed to keep the two canoes side by side as the current whirled them on through the darkness.

Nugget was not aware of this at first, for he uttered another piercing cry for help. It was impossible to carry on any conversation owing to the confused booming noise made by the water, but Ned leaned to one side and shouted at the top of his voice: "Cheer up, Nugget. I'm here beside you. We'll find a way out of this."

Nugget must have heard and understood, for he was silent after that.

It was characteristic of Ned to cheer his companion. He was thoroughly unselfish, and was always more concerned about others than himself. In this case his consoling words meant nothing. He was still dazed by the overwhelming calamity that had befallen him, and had not begun to realize its extent.

He remembered the lantern that was in the forward

hatch and the match safe in his pocket, but the former was out of reach and the latter was on his right side. He could not get it with his left hand, and he was afraid to trust the holding of the canoes to Nugget. So a light was out of the question at the present time.

The painful suspense of the next few minutes made them seem like hours. The canoes whirled on and on with a dizzy swaying motion, but not the faintest ray of light broke the intensity of the darkness.

Ned cautiously thrust his paddle out to the left, and it struck something hard with a ringing noise. He did not repeat the experiment for fear of upsetting.

All at once the roar of the water seemed to deepen, and the canoes settled into a swift, steady rush that made the air fairly sing about Ned's ears. What followed was never very clear to him afterward. He remembered a dash of icy spray in his face, and then a terrible collision that landed him somewhere on his hands and knees.

He was stunned and dizzy for a little while, and when finally he staggered to his feet his first thought was of Nugget. He called him by name, and a hollow groan was the only reply. Even that was better than silence, and with a trembling hand Ned drew out his match box and struck a light.

Both canoes lay upset at his feet, and between them was Nugget leaning on his elbows with a very dazed expression on his face.

Three more matches enabled Ned to right the Pioneer, procure his lantern, and light it. Then, seeing

that Nugget was uninjured, he scrutinized his surroundings more closely.

He understood at once what had happened. The underground stream made a sharp curve at this point, and the force of the current had thrown the canoes far out on a sandy beach. From above, the yellow flood came roaring and tossing through a passage some twenty feet wide, and nearly the same in height. Below the angle it plunged on under the same conditions.

The beach was about ten yards long, and sloped back half that distance to a slimy wall of rock. On the opposite side of the stream the wall fell sheer into the water, and overhead was a jagged roof that glittered and sparkled in the rays of the lantern.

Ned formed his own conclusions as to the nature of the place, and they were not entirely unfavorable, for the speed and impetuosity of the muddy stream had given him a good deal to think about. He dismissed his reflections until a more favorable time, and placing the lantern on the sand turned to Nugget, who was in a pitiable state of fright.

"Are you hurt any, old fellow?" asked Ned, "or only a little stunned?"

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," moaned Nugget. "What awful place are we in, Ned? It seems like a dream. I hardly remember what happened. And where are Clay and Randy?"

"I hope they are safe," replied Ned evasively. "In fact, I really think they are, Nugget. They landed some distance below us, and no doubt found a

place to climb out before the flood caught them."

"And what happened to us, Ned? Didn't the current drag us into a hole in the cliff?"

"Yes," said Ned," "that's it exactly, and we are now in an underground cavern. Don't be alarmed," he added quickly, noting the sudden pallor on his companion's face, "our situation is not so terrible after all. Caverns of this sort are always found among limestone hills, and they usually have two outlets. This one is no exception to the rule, and I'll tell you why I think so. In the first place you must remember that the creek was nearly four feet high before that dam broke. The extra volume of water is what makes this terrific current through the cavern and the very fact that the water goes on through without damming up proves to me that it has an outlet.

"When the creek is at its normal level I don't believe any water flows into the cavern at all, and even with a four foot raise I don't think much goes through. It was the first rush of the flood that carried us into the hole. And now do you see what I am driving at? As soon as the back water from Honck's dam has spent itself — and it can't take very long — the stream in front of us will become shallow, and then all we need to do is to follow it down to the outlet. It probably cuts across some bend and re-enters the creek. And we have penetrated such a distance from the mouth that the outlet can't be far away. I can't swear to all this, Nugget, but I am pretty well con-

vinced that I am right. A very short time will settle the question one way or another."

"I hope what you say will come true," replied Nugget dolefully. "This is a horrible place to be in. It gives me the shivers to think of it. But if all the water runs out, won't we have to leave our canoes behind?" he added quickly.

"We won't wait that long," said Ned. "Don't be downhearted. There is surely a way out of this cavern, and we'll find it. Our situation might be far worse than it is. We have matches and a lantern, and there are crackers in my canoe."

"Are there?" exclaimed Nugget eagerly. "I think I'll eat a few. You're an awfully good fellow, Ned. I don't feel half as bad now."

"It's a good sign to be hungry," replied Ned laughingly. He brought some of the crackers, and both ate them as they sat side by side on the sand.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DESPAIR

In the course of an hour Ned's prediction began to be verified. The roar of the flood ceased entirely, and the water receded from the beach until the stream looked as shallow and quiet as a meadow brook. Ned waded clear across to the opposite wall without going over his knees.

"The flood from the dam has spent itself. I'm afraid we'll have to wade through and pull the canoes after us. I can see shoals and ledges not far below. I'll lead the way with the lantern."

This proposition was far from pleasing to Nugget, but he uttered no remonstrance. He had implicit faith in Ned by this time.

The canoes were pulled into the water, and without delay the boys started down the gloomy channel. They pushed the canoes ahead of them, and in this way supported themselves and lessened the danger of slipping.

For a while they made fair progress and encountered but few shoals. The stream was nowhere more than knee deep.

Under these favorable circumstances Ned relaxed

his caution, and the consequence was that his feet slipped on the smooth stone, and down he went into a pretty deep hole. The lantern fell from his hand was extinguished, and the canoe shot ahead of him.

Nugget's cry of alarm was the first thing that Ned heard when he recovered his footing, and he found himself almost breast deep in water. He was shivering with cold — and with something else as well, for he realized the full meaning of the disaster, and for a moment he was sick and faint.

"I'm all right, Nugget," he shouted. "Stay where you are. Don't move a foot."

Then he waded cautiously forward until the channel was knee deep again, and shaking the water form his hands as well as he could, he drew out the precious match and struck a light.

His canoe had lodged on a reef a few feet down stream, but the lantern was gone beyond recovery, The situation was serious. Nugget's lantern was in Randy's canoe, and worse than all, only four matches remained in the box.

"It's a bad fix," thought Ned; "but we must make the best of it. Nugget," he added aloud, "push your canoe along the right side. I think the water is shallow there."

Nugget obeyed, and joined his companion without difficulty.

"Have you any matches?" asked Ned.

"Not a single one." Nugget went through his pockets to make sure, and turned a shade whiter when

he saw Ned's scanty stock, two of which were already exhausted.

"This is terrible," he exclaimed huskily. "What can we do now?"

"Not very much," replied Ned. "Keep your spirits up, though; that's the important thing. Here, take these, and burn one at a time."

He handed the match box to Nugget, and quickly drew the canoes side by side. He took a stout fishing line from his pocket and tied them together at bow and stern.

Then he rummaged the hatches in a vain search for something that would burn. Even the paper that was around some of the bundles was damp from spray and leakage.

"Well, Nugget, we must make the best of it," he said. "All we can do is to push on in the dark. Is that the last match?"

"One left," answered Nugget dolefully, and heaved a long sigh.

"Don't use it, then. It may come in handy later on. The situation is not as bad as it looks. We can stick close together and push the canoes ahead of us. In that way we won't run any risk of striking the wall. Of course we can't move very rapidly, but our getting out of the cavern is only a question of time."

"I hope it won't take long," said Nugget. "A day or two of this would drive me mad."

Just then the match he was holding burnt to the end and fell in the water. He restored the box to

Ned, and taking hold of the canoes at the stern ends, they moved slowly through the darkness.

No words can adequately describe the suffering and thoughts of the two lads during the next hour. Nugget could not repress an occasional complaint, and even the stout hearted Ned felt at times as though he must cry out.

The fate of Clay and Randy weighed almost as heavily upon him as his own misfortunes He knew their chance of escape had been very slight, and he feared they had not been able to take advantage of it. Little wonder then that he looked forward with almost equal dread and joy to reaching the end of the cavern.

That ordeal, however, promised to be long delayed. It was a painfully laborious task to accomplish even a snail-like progress through the dark passage.

What lay before them the boys could only imagine, and they constantly feared some calamity. It was impossible to keep the canoes straight. They veered to right and left, striking the rocky sides of the channel, which actually seemed to be growing narrower.

Every few moments they stuck fast on a shoal or submerged reef, and then Ned had to feel his way to the front with his paddle, and dislodge them by main force. The water was of variable depth, and half a dozen times the boys suddenly plunged breast deep into a hole, but fortunately did not let go of the canoes.

At the end of an hour the situation was unchanged. As yet not a ray of light was visible ahead. Ned

cheered his companion with hopeful words, and both struggled on and on, straining their eyes through the gloom to catch the first glimpse of light.

They felt that their powers of endurance would soon be spent. They were intensely weary, and chilled to the bone by their dripping clothes. Contact with the rocks had bruised their hands and feet, and every step was a torture.

At last the canoes grounded on some yielding surface and refused to budge. Ned staggered forward and found their prows imbedded in what he judged to be a bar of sand and gravel stretching across the channel. He walked on a few steps to ascertain it's width, and was amazed and frightened by coming in contact with a solid wall of rock.

"Come here, quick, Nugget!" he called hoarsely.

Nugget waded alongside the canoes, and was soon on the bar.

"What is it?" he cried. "Anything wrong?"

For answer Ned took the last match from the little metal box, and lighted it.

As the little blaze flared up the boys looked curiously about them. One brief glimpse revealed the awful truth. The sandy bar was in reality the end of the passage. Beyond it rose a smooth, slimy wall, and overhead was a low jagged roof dripping with moisture. The canoes lay in a quiet pool of water that was as dead and void of current as a mill pond.

CHAPTER XXXV

NUGGET DISCOVERS A LIGHT

THE half-burned match fell from Ned's trembling fingers, and went out on the sand. Then there was silence for nearly a minute — a terrible, oppressive silence.

It was broken by a sharp cry from Nugget that echoed far through the cavern. He seized Ned by one arm and clung to him, trembling from head to foot.

"Is there no hope?" he wailed pitifully. "Must we stay in this awful place until we die? I can't stand it, Ned, indeed I can't. Oh! do something quick, won't you?"

Ned was at a loss to reply. His own heart was full of misery and despair. What word of comfort could he give his companion? Would it be wise to give him any — to excite hopes that might never be realized?

He put his arm about Nugget, and this seemed to comfort the lad a little.

"We will surely find a way to escape, Ned?" he asked in a calmer tone. "Don't you think so?"

"It shan't be our fault if we don't," returned Ned. "You must be brave, Nugget — brave and patient.

We are worn out and exhausted now, and must have rest before we can do anything more."

"I was awfully tired a minute ago," said Nugget, "but I feel now as though I could push on all day if I was sure of finding the way out of this cavern. Do you think we will have to go all the way back — to the place we entered by, I mean?"

"I hope that won't be necessary," replied Ned. "The simple truth is that we have blundered into a side passage, that has no outlet. It can't be very long since we got off the right track, for I remember the current against my legs. We will go back after a while and find the turning."

"In this pitch darkness?" exclaimed Nugget.

"We will feel our way along the wall," said Ned, "and if the canoes are in the road we'll abandon them. We won't start now though. Sit down and take a good rest. You will need it."

Nugget obediently climbed into his canoe, and Ned did the same. For a long while they sat thus, side by side, without speaking. Ned's courage was almost at the breaking point. In spite of his sanguine words he felt that the chance were terribly adverse. Without a ray of light to guide them it would be a difficult matter to find the main channel of the stream again, and follow it to the outlet which must certainly exist. There was danger of falling into deep holes, of striking sharp rocks, or blundering into other side passages with which the cavern was doubtless honeycombed.

Oppressed with such sad reflections Ned let the

time go by unheeded, and at length, through very fatigue, he fell into a kind of doze. How long he remained thus he did not know, but he was suddenly roused to consciousness by a shrill cry from Nugget:

"Look, Ned, a light! a light!"

Ned first believed that his companion was either dreaming or in delirium, but when he glanced along the passage he saw a yellow flickering glare, and outlined against it a tall black figure.

"It's a man with a torch," cried Ned hoarsely.

"And he's going away from us," exclaimed Nugget, "call him, quick!"

The boys made the cavern ring with loud shouts, and when a quick response came they were almost frantic with joy.

The torch was motionless for an instant. Then it came nearer and nearer, casting a ruddy light on the slimy walls of the passage, until the boys could see plainly the tall bearded man who carried it.

"Found at last!" exclaimed the stranger in a cheery voice as he waded out on the beach. "This will be good news for them other chaps."

"Are our friends safe?" cried Ned eagerly. "Did they escape the flood?"

"Yes," replied the man. "Didn't even get wet or lose their canoes. Come right along now, an' I'll take you to them. I wouldn't let them enter the cavern for fear of accidents. This ain't the time to explain things. All that will come later. My name is Jonas Packer, an' I'm the man what blowed that horn this

morning when I seen you chaps down on the creek."

In view of Mr. Packer's evident anxiety to get out of the cavern as soon as possible the boys repressed their desire to ask more questions. Pain and fatigue were forgotten as they entered the water and pushed the canoes back along the passage, while their guide preceded them, holding the blazing torch over his head.

Five minutes later they reached the main channel, and turning a sharp angle found themselves in swiftly running water once more.

"This is where you boys got astray, I reckon," said Mr. Packer. "It's good you sung out when you did, because I was going right on to the front end of the cavern. I didn't think about this side pocket at the time."

"Are we near the rear end?" inquired Ned.

"Purty close," was the reassuring reply. "You'll know when you come to it."

For half an hour longer the boys pushed on through the narrow winding passage, finding the stream as rugged and full of difficulties as it had been earlier in the day. With Mr. Packer's aid, however, they readily skirted the deep pools and pulled the canoes over the obstructing ledges and shallows.

Then, somewhat to their consternation, they saw a jagged wall of rock towering before them. This was undoubtedly the termination of the cavern, but where was the outlet?

"Hold this over your head and stay right here,"

said Mr. Packer, handing Ned the torch. "I'll be with you in a minute."

He waded toward the wall, pulling the canoes after him, until the water was above his waist. Then, one at a time, he shot the canoes into a long, low crevice at the base of the cliff, and they vanished with a grating noise.

He waded back to the boys and led them to a narrow strip of sand on the right of the passage. Without a word he climbed nimbly up the rocks and entered a circular hole where the space was so contracted that Ned and Nugget had to bend almost double and hold their arms in front of them.

They made several sharp turns, slipped down a slide of moist, sticky clay — and emerged suddenly into the warm, sultry air of the outer world.

A glad cry fell from the boys' lips. A few yards distant lay the surface of the creek, and in the angle formed by the shore and a rocky hillside that fell sheer to the water, was a snowy tent, and a campfire behind it, and two slim figures standing in the flame light. The next instant the Jolly Rovers were united, and with joy too deep for words they clasped hands.

Mr. Packer slipped quietly away, and jumping into a boat paddled after the two canoes which had emerged from under the cliff a moment before, and were now sliding swiftly down stream.

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOME AGAIN

It was some time before the boys could talk coherently. A dry change of clothes and the good supper their companions had prepared in readiness, made Ned and Nugget feel pretty much like themselves again, and sitting about the camp fire they told the thrilling story of their adventure.

Then Clay and Randy related their escape from the flood, telling how they had reached a break in the cliff — a steep, bushy slope — up which they dragged their canoes in time to avoid the sudden deluge.

The missing links were supplied by Jonas Packer.

"I seen you two fellows shoot into the cavern," he said, "and as soon as the flood went down a little, I took my boat and went across to the other chaps, who were pretty badly scared about that time. Knowin' all about the cavern, I relieved their minds a little and persuaded them to paddle around the bend with me to the place where the cavern came out. Then we all went inside and waited and waited for two or three hours, I reckon. You see I kinder expected you boys to come straight through without upsetting.

"I was afraid then to wade up the channel for fear of more high water. But when evening come, an' no signs of you yet, the thing began to look serious. So I told those lads to h'ist the tent an' get supper ready — more to cheer them than anything else — an' then I lit the pine torch I'd brought along, and struck into the cavern, bent on going clear through if I could, and the rest of my story you fellows know. It was a narrow escape, I tell you."

"It was the worst adventure I ever had," said Ned. "The time we were in there seemed like days instead of hours. Is the cavern very long?"

"Not more'n half a mile. It took you a good while to come through though. It was about eight o'clock in the evening when I found you. You see the cavern cuts straight under the hill, and enters the creek again below the bend. To go around by land it's a good mile and a half.

"In low water both ends of the cavern are high and dry, and you can go all the way through on foot. Indian Cave is what they call it because the Indians used to hide there more'n a hundred years ago."

Mr. Packer related several interesting reminiscences of the cavern, until he saw that the boys were getting sleepy. Then he left for home promising to rig up a paddle in place of the one Nugget had lost, and also to bring him an old hat.

A few moments later the Jolly Rovers were sleeping soundly in the tent, and the dying camp fire was gleaming on the muddy surface of the creek.

Tuesday was a clear, sunny day, but the boys decided to defer their departure until the next morning. Ned and Nugget felt the need of a little rest.

After breakfast Jonas Packer returned, bringing quite a respectable paddle on which he had been working since daybreak, and a broad brimmed straw hat, which Nugget regarded as a very poor substitute for his trim yachting cap.

Harvest work required the good natured farmer's immediate return. The boys parted from him with genuine regret, and only with the greatest difficulty could they induce him to accept pay for the paddle — the very least of the services he had rendered them.

The greater part of the day was spent in furbishing up clothes and camp equipments and scrubbing the collected dirt and scum of three weeks from the decks and sides of the canoes. The boys realized that the cruise was about ended, and they hoped by the aid of the high water and an early start to reach home on the morrow.

There was no longer any temptation to linger by the way, since the lower reaches of the creek with which they had been familiar for some years past, were only a few miles distant. The chief charm of canoeing is to explore strange waters.

The Jolly Rovers were up bright and early on Wednesday morning, and in default of bread or crackers they made some cakes out of flour and water, and relished them, too. It was a strange coincidence that the provisions should have lasted just until this

time. With the exception of a little oatmeal the jars were quite empty.

About half past seven the Pioneer led the way down stream, proudly shaking the faded penant to the breeze, and soon the mouth of Indian Cave was far behind. The creek was now barely a foot above its normal level, but this was quite sufficient to make a swift current, and the mile after mile, bend after bend fell behind the flashing paddles of the Jolly Rovers.

At ten o'clock they reached the first familiar landmark — Roop's Dam — and the home coming began to seem a reality indeed. The Susquehanna was six miles distant as the crow flies, but almost thrice six by the snaky curvatures of the channel down which they were making their way.

Midway on the breast of the dam was lodged a section of the red bridge, and it recalled vividly to the boys the circumstances under which they had last seen it.

They found an easy portage for the canoes, and were off again without delay. While the sunny afternoon slowly lengthened they paddled on through a now familiar country, passing Sporting Hill — a famous place for bass — about four o'clock, and reaching Oyster's Dam — endeared by many boyish memories — just an hour later.

Another portage, and then away at full speed between wooded banks and green islands, to the nail works dam, where the air rang to the clatter of big

hammers and pitchy black smoke was vomited skyward from huge stacks.

A brief dash through foaming shallows and rapids, with the hamlet of Fairview on one side and the wooded bluffs of Bunker Hill on the other, a swift glide into the shadows of the old Red Bridge — and then the Jollly Rovers were on the broad bosom of the Susquehanna. They shouted and laughed and waved their caps in the air for very joy.

A mile across the tide were the upper suburbs of the city, and diagonally down stream, three miles away, was the great yellow dome of the capitol, and beyond it, faint in the golden haze of sunset, the piers and spans of five mighty bridges, capped by clustered spires and roofs.

Soon the Jolly Rovers rounded the upper point of Independence Island and paddled on by the city shores until the porch of Randy's boat house hove in view.

Ned was first to reach the float, and stepping out of his canoe he seized the pennant and waved it aloft. "The cruise of the Jolly Rovers is ended," he cried. "May we make another like it!"

"And never a shorter one!" added Randy. "It will be four weeks on Friday morning since we started."

They give three loud cheers together, and with eager hands carried the canoes into the boat house. Then they climbed to the top of the bank, and marched homeward through the city with the proud step

and mien of a conquering army. Far more to be prized than spoils of victory were their healthy, bronzed faces.

And so the wonderful cruise came to an end — in one way at least, though the memories of it will never be forgotten. Apart from its keen enjoyments, and thrilling adventures, and the freshened vigor of health that it imparted, the boys learned more than one lesson that will prove of service in after life. From that time Randy was less self willed, and better able to curb his temper, for his eyes had been opened to the serious consequences that may result from these faults.

Clay had learned to regard practical jokes and mocking words in a more serious light than they had ever appeared to him before, while Nugget was more self reliant and less timid after the rugged experiences he had passed through.

Even Ned — to whose constant cool headedness and knowledge of out door craft the success of the cruise was mainly due — had profited by lessons of patience and endurance. And he was happy — with that happiness which comes to one who has benefitted his fellow man — in the consciousness that he had helped Bug Batters to the commencement of a new and a better life.

The boys are yet far from the cares and responsibilities of manhood, and they will probably make more than one cruise in the happy summer vacations to come, but it is doubtful if brighter memories will

ever dim the cheerished wealth of affection they feel for the faded pennant, the scarred and battered paddles, and the water soaked log book, which now hangs on the boathouse wall — mute mementoes of the time the Jolly Rovers paddled down the winding waters of the Conodoguinet.

THE END

Three Strong Stories for Boys

Ralph of the Roundhouse;

Or, Bound to Become a Railroad Man

By Allen Chapman

Railroad stories are always dear to the heart of the American boy, and here we have one which is clean and clever from start to finish. Ralph is bound to become a railroad man, and starts in at the very foot of the ladder. He makes both friends and enemies, but "wins out" in the best meaning of that term.

Cloth. 12mo. Illustrated. Price, $1.00.

Rival Ocean Divers;

Or, The Search for a Sunken Treasure

By Roy Rockwood

A well-written story of the deep blue sea, telling of the perils of a diver's life and of the marvels to be found at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean. The search for the sunken treasure is made by rival parties, and the book will prove inviting to all boys who love the sea.

Cloth. 12mo. Illustrated. Price, 60 cents.

Lost in the Land of Ice;

Or, Daring Adventures Around the South Pole

By Captain Ralph Bonehill

An expedition is fitted out by a rich young man who loves the ocean, and with him goes the hero of the tale, a lad who has some knowledge of a treasure ship said to be cast away in the land of ice. On the way the expedition is stopped by enemies, and the heroes land among the wild Indians of Patagonia. When the ship approaches the South Pole it is caught in a huge iceberg, and several of those on board become truly lost in the land of ice.

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated. Price, 60 cents.

CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY

New York

NEW STORIES FOR GIRLS

By Mrs. L. T. Meade

12mo. cloth, stamped in colors and gold. Each volume finely illustrated. Price per volume, postpaid, $1.25.

The Girls of Mrs. Pritchard's School

Ten full-page illustrations by Lewis Baumer

This story, as are all Mrs. Meade's, is an attractive one, full of knowledge of girl nature. Its incidents are varied and described with vivacity and directness. This new volume increases the obligation under which this popular writer has placed so many readers.

A Madcap

Eight full-page illustrations by Harold Copping

A story which tells of a young Spanish girl who inherits some property in England, and comes over to take possession of it. Her trials, troubles, and difficulties are vividly described, and, with all the girl's faults, one cannot help being drawn to her, as she is depicted with such a sympathetic touch.

The Manor School

Ten full-page illustrations

A sweetly written and charming story of girl life. Full of fun and adventure. Told in a manner to interest and amuse young people of all ages.

A Bevy of Girls

Handsomely illustrated

A powerful tale that all girls from ten to eighteen will enjoy. The characters are taken from actual life, and many incidents are based upon facts.

CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY

New York

SCHOOL AND COLLEGE STORIES

By WILLIAM D. MOFFAT

12mo. Cloth, stamped in colors and gold. Finely illustrated.
Price, $1.00

The Crimson Banner

A Story of College Baseball

Several books have been written about college baseball, but it remained for Mr. Moffat, a Princeton man, to come forward with a tale that fairly grips one from start to finish. The students are almost flesh and blood, and the contests become real as we read about them. Beyond a doubt, the best all-around college and baseball tale yet presented. We predict an unusually large sale for this volume.

A Schoolboy's Honor

Or, The Secret of Hosmer Hall

This is a realistic school story of to-day, full of vigor, with some exciting contests, on the ice and elsewhere, and with a mystery which will perhaps interest the older folks as much as young people. Brad Mattoon is a thorough boy, no better and no worse than thousands of others, and the tale is told with great fidelity to real life.

CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY
New York

Some Strong Stories for Boys

Redskins and Colonists;

Or, A Boy's Adventures in the Early Days of Virginia

By G. A. Henty

Fully illustrated. 12mo. Cloth. Price, 75 cents.

A rousing story of Colonial pioneer life in the early days in Virginia, recounting the many daring and dangerous encounters with the Indian savages. Full of historic interest.

Under the Star-Spangled Banner

By Captain F. S. Brereton

A vivid and accurate account of the Spanish-American War. The hero leaves his home in search of work, finds it on a Cuban plantation, and afterwards joins the Rough Riders and participates in the battles around Santiago. Cloth. 12mo. Price, 75c.

One of the Fighting Scouts

By Captain F. S. Brereton

At the period of the Boer War the hero and a friend are overcome by two Boers, and compelled to leave home and take service with the British, where the hero is given command of a band of scouts. He becomes of signal service to his country by his brilliant exploits. Cloth. 12mo. Price, 75 cents.

Sweeping the Seas

A Story of the Confederate Cruiser "Alabama"

By Dr. Gordon Stables, R. N.

Dr. Stables derives his information from his friend, Dr. Llewellyn, surgeon of the "Alabama," and from the narrative of Captain Semmes. It is a thrilling and highly interesting story, worthy of the author's high reputation. Cloth. 12mo. Price, 60 cents.

CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY

New York

WORLD-WIDE ADVENTURE SERIES

By Edward S. Ellis

Cloth, 12mo, stamped in colors and gold. Handsomely illustrated. Price per volume, postpaid, 60 cents.

The books written by Mr. Ellis are too well known to need a special introduction here. All are bright, breezy, and full of life, character, and adventure. They cover a wide field, and consequently appeal to all classes of young folks.

The Telegraph Messenger Boy;

Or, The Straight Road to Success

In this tale life in a country town is well described. There is a mysterious bank robbery, which fills the community with excitement. There is likewise a flood on the river; and through all this whirl of events the young telegraph messenger exhibits a pluck and sagacity sure to win the admiration and approval of all wide-awake boys.

Other Volumes in this Series:

From the Throttle to the President's Chair
Tad; or "Getting Even" with Him
Through Jungle and Wilderness
A Waif of the Mountains
Down the Mississippi
Life of Kit Carson
Land of Wonders
Lost in the Wilds
Up the Tapajos
Lost in Samoa
Red Plum

CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY

New York

THE PUTNAM HALL SERIES

Companion Stories to the Famous Rover Boys Series

By Arthur M. Winfield

Ever since the publication of the first volumes in the famous "Rover Boys Series," Mr. Arthur M. Winfield has been requested by the boys and girls everywhere to relate more of the doings of the Cadets at Putnam Hall. He responds with a new series of stories which are certain to add to his well-known reputation and extend his already large circle of readers.

Handsomely illustrated. Bound in cloth and colors.
Price, 60 cents per volume.

The Putnam Hall Cadets;

Or, Good Times in School and Out

The cadets are lively, flesh-and-blood fellows, bound to make friends from the very start. There are some keen rivalries, in school and out, and something is told of a remarkable midnight feast and a hazing that had an unlooked-for ending. Every boy or girl who has ever read a "Rover Boys" book will want to peruse this volume.

Other volumes in this series will be announced shortly

Bob the Photographer;

Or, A Hero in Spite of Himself

By Arthur M. Winfield

This story relates the experiences of a poor boy who falls in with a "camera fiend," and thus develops a liking for photography. After a number of unusual and stirring adventures Bob becomes photographer for a railroad, and while taking pictures along the line thwarts the plan of those who would injure the railroad corporation and incidentally clears a mystery surrounding his parentage.

12mo, cloth, illustrated. Price, 60 cents.

CHATTERTON-PECK COMPANY

New York

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
00024905482